

Press release from All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

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MPs urge Government to reform laws on pornography to combat violence against women

A cross-party group of MPs, led by Dame Diana Johnson, is calling on the Government to enact a series of urgent law reforms to combat the harms associated with pornography, following a year-long inquiry into the pornography industry¹. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Commercial Sexual Exploitation's² inquiry concludes that the epidemic of male violence against women and girls cannot be ended unless the Government confronts the role pornography plays in fuelling sexual violence. The APPG's inquiry report, *Pornography Regulation: The case for parliamentary reform*, will be launched in the Houses of Parliament on Monday 27 February 2023³.

The report highlights the scale and nature of contemporary online pornography, finding that the user base of pornography is highly gendered, with significantly more men watching pornography than women. Violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography, and illegal content - including videos of child sexual exploitation, rape and sex trafficking victims - is freely accessible on mainstream pornography websites.

The report goes on to evidence a multiplicity of harms connected with the pornography industry. Pornography is found to fuel sexual violence and social and political harms against women and girls, as well as perpetuating racist stereotypes. Children continue to be exposed to online pornography on an alarming scale, which the group calls "an egregious violation of child safeguarding". Meanwhile, sexual coercion is found to be inherent to the commercial production of pornography, with producers commonly adopting exploitative and abusive tactics to coerce women into being filmed for pornography videos.

The inquiry concludes that existing legislation relating to pornography is piecemeal and wholly inadequate with respect to preventing and providing redress for harms perpetuated as part of the trade.

As a result of its inquiry, the APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation has made the following recommendations to Government:

1. Make the regulation of pornography consistent across different online platforms, and between the online and offline spheres.

2. Criminalise the supply of pornography online to children, and legally require age verification for accessing pornography online.
3. Address pornography as commercial sexual exploitation, and a form of violence against women, in legislation and policy.
4. Legally require online platforms to verify that every individual featured in pornographic content on their platform is an adult and gave permission for the content to be published there.
5. Give individuals who feature in pornographic material the legal right to withdraw their consent to material in which they feature being published and/or distributed.
6. Hold exploiters to account by making it a criminal offence to enable or profit from the commercial sexual exploitation of others.
7. Conduct a comprehensive review of laws on pornography and obscenity.

Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, said:

“The APPG’s landmark inquiry lays bare the scale of harms being wreaked by the online pornography industry. Vulnerable women in the trade are sexually exploited by predatory pornographers, girls and women suffer extensive social harms as a result of its normalisation, and a generation of boys are being raised on a sexual viewing diet of violence and abuse.

“The results are in and the evidence is clear. Pornography fuels sexual violence. In a society in which male violence against women and girls is rampant, combatting the harms of pornography should be front and centre of policy and strategy against sexual violence. Yet successive governments have mostly ignored the pornography trade, allowing the online industry to operate largely unregulated. It’s no coincidence then, and no surprise, that some of the most popular pornography websites - visited by millions of, mostly, men - have been found hosting and profiting from outright illegal content, including child sexual abuse, footage of rapes and trafficking victims.

“It’s now high time that Government acted and recognised the damage caused by the pornography industry to the lives and the safety of women. What does that mean? As a basic first step, it means ending the age of self-regulation for the online pornography industry; it means requiring all pornography websites to verify the age and consent of everyone featured in content on their sites before it is published; and it means criminalising the supply of online pornography to children. But more than that, it requires a comprehensive overhaul of our outdated laws on the production and distribution of pornography. At present, legislation pays scant regard to the harms perpetrated by the pornography trade, particularly against women; whereas the goal of preventing these harms should be at the heart of our legal framework.

“I hope this report, along with other recently published reports on this issue, mark a turning point in how politicians respond to the pornography trade. For too long, governments have failed to treat it as the serious political issue that it is. Combatting the commercial sexual exploitation embodied by the porn industry, and the multifarious harms it causes, is one of the biggest challenges of our age. If society is remotely serious about ending male violence against women, then it is a challenge that governments can no longer hide from.”

Giving evidence to the inquiry, Alia Dewees, Director of Aftercare at Safe House Project and survivor of pornography and trafficking, said of her experience in the pornography industry:

“when I did not want to consent, when I was feeling uncomfortable, unsafe, or unwilling, I did not have the freedom to leave that shoot without repercussions. I didn’t have the freedom to leave and know that I wasn’t going to be sued for breach of contract.”

Giving evidence to the inquiry, Lynn Perry MBE, Chief Executive of Barnardo’s, said:

“viewing pornography which is often extreme and violent really distorts children and young people’s understanding of healthy relationships and runs the risk of normalising what is abusive, sexual behaviour. Our frontline workers are supporting children every single day who have watched harmful online pornography and been negatively impacted by it in a range of ways.”

Giving evidence to the inquiry, Taina Bien-Aimé, Executive Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, said:

“it is key to note that the business model for pornographers and the internet service providers that distribute pornography rests not just on systemic sex-based discrimination, sexual violence, and exploitation, but also on systemic racism and ethnic discrimination. No other commerce could advertise its product on the pervasive dehumanisation of human beings based on race or ethnicity, and yet governments allow, in violation of national and international law, the sale and distribution of pornographic materials segregated by the worst forms of race and ethnicity-based negative stereotypes.”

Giving evidence to the inquiry, Dr Jackson Katz, education and author of *The Macho Paradox*, said:

“the evidence is in. Hundreds of studies about the effects of porn over the past 30 years have established what many of us with basic media literacy skills, as well as common sense, have long known, which is that porn culture is a pervasive presence in the lives and sexual psyches of millions, and billions in fact, of boys, young men and men. Therefore, it’s impossible to understand or effectively work to end men’s violence against women without addressing the deeply misogynist porn that so many boys are exposed to from their earliest encounters with the genre...”

For further information and to request an embargoed copy of the report or interviews, please contact contact@appg-cse.uk.

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Notes to editors

¹ The objectives of the inquiry were to:

1. Assess the scale and nature of the contemporary pornography industry;
2. Identify the types and severity of harms associated with the production and consumption of pornography; and
3. Establish what legal framework is needed in the UK to prevent and address the harms associated with the production and consumption of pornography.

The inquiry heard from a range of witnesses including survivors of pornography, academics, frontline support services and children's organisations. A review of academic literature on the subject was also undertaken. Further information about the inquiry is available here: www.appg-cse.uk/inquiry.

² Chaired by Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, the APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation brings together parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to work for an end to all forms of commercial sexual exploitation. Further information about the group is available here: www.appg-cse.uk. The APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation can also be found on Twitter: mobile.twitter.com/APPG_CSE.

³ The inquiry report will be launched at an event taking place in the Houses of Parliament on Monday 27 February 2023. Speakers will include:

- Alia Dewees: Director of Aftercare, Safe House Project and survivor of pornography and trafficking
- David Austin: Chief Executive, BBFC
- Lynn Perry MBE: Chief Executive of Barnardo's
- Lord Bethell of Romford: House of Lords
- Farah Hussain: Acting Director, UK Feminista
- Chaired by Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP: Chair of the APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation