

Growing Up in Pornland: Girls Have Had It with Porn Conditioned Boys

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"[I want] better education regarding sex for both boys and girls [and] information about pornography, and the way it influences harmful sexual practices."

These are the words of Lucy, aged 15, one of 600 young Australian women and girls who took part in a just-released survey commissioned by Plan Australia and Our Watch. The survey, conducted by Ipsos, gathered responses from the girls and young women aged 15-19 in all states and territories.

In the survey report, entitled *'Don't send me that pic'*, participants reported that online sexual abuse and harassment were endemic. More than 80% said it was unacceptable for boyfriends to request naked images.

Sexual bullying and harassment are part of daily life for many girls. Young people are speaking out more and more about how these practices have links with pornography - and so they should, because they have most to lose.

Pornography is moulding and conditioning the sexual behaviours and attitudes of boys, and girls are being left without the resources to deal with these porn-saturated boys.

My own engagement with young women over the last few years in schools around Australia, confirms that we are conducting a pornographic experiment on young people - an assault on their healthy sexual development.

If there are still any questions about whether porn has an impact on young people's sexual attitudes and behaviours, perhaps it's time to listen to young people themselves. 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.

As the Plan Australia/Our Watch report found, girls are tired of being pressured for images they don't want to send, but they seem resigned to how normal the practice has become. Boys use the images as a form of currency, to swap and share and to use to humiliate girls publicly.

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.

I meet girls who describe being groped in the school yard, girls routinely sexually harassed at school or on the school bus on the way home. They tell me boys act like they are entitled to girls' bodies. Defenders of porn often say that it provides sex education. And it does: it teaches even very young boys that women and girls are always up for it. "No" in fact means *yes, or persuade me*.

Girls describe being ranked at school on their bodies, and are sometimes compared to the bodies of porn stars. They know they can't compete, but that doesn't stop them thinking they have to. Requests for labiaplasty have tripled in a little over a decade among young women aged 15-24. Girls who don't undergo porn-inspired "Brazilian" waxing are often considered ugly or ungroomed (by boys as well as by other girls).

Some girls suffer physical injury from porn-inspired sexual acts, including anal sex. The director of a domestic violence centre on the Gold Coast wrote to me a couple of years ago about the increase in porn-related injuries to girls aged 14 and up, from acts 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."

The Australian Psychological Society estimates that adolescent boys are responsible for around 20% of rapes of adult women and between 30% and 50% of all reported sexual assaults of children. Just last week, Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs argued that online pornography is turning children into copycat sexual predators - acting out on other children what they are seeing in porn.

A 2012 review of research on "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents" found that adolescent consumption of Internet pornography was linked to attitudinal changes, including acceptance of male dominance and female submission as the primary sexual paradigm, with women viewed as "sexual playthings eager to fulfil male sexual desires." The

authors found that "adolescents who are intentionally exposed to violent sexually explicit material were six times more likely to be sexually aggressive than those who were not exposed."

I have asked girls what messages they might like me to pass on to boys. So far, these messages include: "Stop telling us we are wet," "Stop commenting on our bodies," "Stop demanding pictures," "Rape jokes are never funny" and "Sex before the age of consent is illegal."

The proliferation and globalisation of hypersexualised imagery and pornographic themes makes healthy sexual exploration almost impossible. Sexual conquest and domination are untempered by the bounds of respect, intimacy and authentic human connection. Young people are not learning about intimacy, friendship and love, but about cruelty and humiliation. As a recent study found:

"online mainstream pornography overwhelmingly centred on acts of violence and degradation toward women. The sexual behaviours exemplified in pornography skew away from intimacy and tenderness and typify patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity."

It is intimacy and tenderness that so many girls and young women say they are looking for. A young woman told me that on dating sites she lists under "fetish" wanting to stare longingly into someone's eyes and to take sex slow. She said if she didn't put these desires in the "fetish" category, they wouldn't warrant a second glance.

But how will young women find these sensual, slow-burn experiences in men indoctrinated by pornography? Psychologist Philip Zimbardo says of young men: "They don't know the language of face to face contact ... Constant arousal, change, novelty excitement makes them out of sync with slow developing relationships - relationships which build slowly."

It is wrong to leave sexual formation in the hands of the global sex industry. We need to do more to help young people stand up against warped notions of sexuality conveyed in pornography.

Fortunately, the ill-effects of the pornographic experiment on relationships and sexuality are being named out loud. A ground-breaking Australia-first symposium on the issue was held at UNSW last month, to a standing room crowd, and a current Senate inquiry is gathering evidence of the distorting harmful impacts of porn on our young people.

Most importantly, it's young people themselves demanding change. Josie, 18, is quoted in the Plan Australia/Our Watch report:

"We need some sort of crack down on the violent pornography that is currently accessible to boys and men. This violent pornography should be illegal to make or view in Australia as we clearly have a problem with violence and boys are watching a lot of pornography which can be very violent ... This is influencing men's attitude towards women and what they think is acceptable. Violent pornography is infiltrating Australian relationships."

Girls like Lucy and Josie deserve our response.