



**Submission to the
Royal Commission into Family Violence**

June 2015

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Introduction

The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

ACL commends the Premier and the Victorian Government for establishing this commission. Domestic violence is an urgent issue across Australia. Last year nearly 70,000 “family incidents” were attended by Victoria Police, an average of 8 per hour, higher than any other state or territory in Australia.¹ In 2014 a woman was killed in a domestic violence incident every week on average. As of May 1, fifteen women had died in 2015 with their intimate partners or ex-partners being charged for their murder.²

The Victorian Government is taking an important step towards addressing this unacceptable situation.

This submission will not attempt to cover ground that will likely be covered by other contributors to the Commission. Rather, this submission will argue that pornography is an important issue in the discussion of domestic violence generally and violence against women in particular. It is an issue that is often neglected in this context, but is directly relevant to the sexualisation of women and children and to unhealthy sexual practices, as well as to the culture of gender inequality that lies at the heart of violence against women. Thus, the issue is directly relevant to Term 5 of the Terms of Reference, which is:

the need to establish a culture of non-violence and gender equality, and to shape appropriate attitudes towards women and children.

While each Term is independently essential to the inquiry, this submission will focus on this term.

¹ Clare Blumer (May 29, 2015), ‘Australian police deal with a domestic violence matter every two minutes’, ABC, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-29/domestic-violence-data/6503734>.

² Guardian (May 1, 2015), “These women are not statistics’ – deaths in Australian in 2015’, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/global/ng-interactive/2015/mar/17/these-women-are-not-statistics-deaths-in-australia-in-2015>.

Effects of pornography consumption

Pornography use is widespread in society. In one well-known example, a Canadian study had to be abandoned when the researchers could not find a single male in his 20s who had not used pornography.³

In their paper *Regulating Youth Access to Pornography*, Australian researchers Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton report that 84 per cent of boys (and 60 per cent of girls) have been exposed to pornography accidentally, 38 per cent have sought out internet pornography, and 22 per cent do so at least every two or three months. They claim these figures understate the true incidence among youth, with many reluctant to admit these activities.⁴

More recently, psychologist Russell Pratt cites studies indicating that 93 per cent of boys (and 62 per cent of girls) had been exposed to pornography before the age of 18, with an average age of 12.2 years for first-time exposure.⁵

The effects of pornography consumptions are difficult to determine. There is a dearth of comprehensive research, and what research there is varies in its findings.

Michael Flood's research on the effects of pornography on users has found that it "can influence users' attitudes towards and adoption of particular sexual behaviours".⁶ There is also evidence that exposure to pornography increases male sexual aggression. This is true not only for violent pornography but for non-violent pornography depicting consensual sex. Flood says that the "association between pornography and rape-supportive attitudes is evident as a result of exposure both to non-violent . . . and violent pornography".⁷

Flood cites a Canadian study of teenagers with an average age of 14 showing a correlation between consumption of pornography and "their agreement with the idea that it is acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have sex". A US study of children aged 11 to 16 showed that "great exposure to R- and X-rated films was related to stronger acceptance of sexual harassment", and an Italian study of 14-19-year-old adolescents showed "associations between pornography use and sexually harassing a peer or forcing someone into sex".⁸

Flood notes that:

*both correlational and experimental studies find that adolescents' and young adults' exposure to media which sexualises girls and women is associated with greater acceptance of stereotyped and sexist notions about gender and sexual roles, including notions of women as sexual objects.*⁹

He also argues that:

³ Jonathan Liew (December 2, 2009), 'All men watch porn, scientists find', *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/sex/6709646/All-men-watch-porn-scientists-find.html>.

⁴ Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton (2003), 'Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects', *The Australia Institute*, p 1.

⁵ Dr Russ Pratt (2015), 'The 'porn genie' is out of the bottle: Understanding and responding to the impact of pornography on young people', *Australian Psychological Society*, <https://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/april/pratt/>.

⁶ Michael Flood (2009), 'The harms of pornography exposure among children and young people', *Child Abuse Review*, 18: 384-400, p. 390

⁷ Flood, above n 6, p 392.

⁸ Flood, above n 6, p 393.

⁹ Flood, above n 6, p 391.

*particularly for boys and young men, the use of pornography **may exacerbate violence-supportive social norms** and encourage their participation in sexual abuse.¹⁰*

Doctors are reporting that girls are harmed by changing sexual practices and expectations due to widespread pornography among teenage boys. This includes internal injuries from sex practices which girls do not want to engage in but which boys expect of them, as well as emotional problems.¹¹

Pratt also notes the growth in these sexual practices, and cites further studies showing that “young men actually believe that what they are watching provides real templates for sexual activity”.¹²

“A culture of non-violence and gender equality”

NSW Police assistant commission Mark Murdoch claims that the increasing domestic violence problem is linked to pornography, saying:

Common sense would tell you there has to be a linkage between pornography and lack of respect in relationships between young people.¹³

When ABC’s Q&A addressed this issue in February, one of the panellists, Mental Health Social Worker Simon Santosha, observed:

one of the biggest dangers we now face is our mobile phones. They are 12-year-olds with Internet connectivity can type in Google pictures. Now there is a big movie out at the moment that everyone is raving about. You type ‘bondage’ into Google pictures, see what comes up. 12-, 13-, 14-, 15-year-olds who are still developing their sexual identity, their cognitive pathways, are watching these images and it is shaping what they perceive women want and no-one is telling them otherwise. Where are the parents? Where are the fathers? ...If it doesn’t start with us, the parents, all they’ve got is the mobile phone and Internet pornography to get their ideas on how to treat women, and that’s frightening. That really is frightening.¹⁴

As discussed, the Royal Commission’s Terms of Reference include “the need to establish a culture of non-violence and gender equality, and to shape appropriate attitudes towards women and children”. A culture in which pornography is so easily and commonly accessed is surely contributing to a culture of violence and a lack of respect towards women, as identified by Mr Murdoch and Mr Santosha.

The link between domestic violence and pornography consumption is a largely unresearched area. Evidence does suggest that pornography contributes to more sexually aggressive attitudes, suggesting that more research between domestic violence and pornography should be done. In any case, it is arguably impossible to reconcile increasing pornography consumption with improving

¹⁰ Flood, above n 6, p 384.

¹¹ Allison Pearson (April 25, 2015), ‘How online porn is warping the behaviour of boys with girls’, *The Age*, <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/how-online-porn-is-warping-the-behaviour-of-boys-with-girls-20150424-1ms7jw.html>.

¹² Pratt, above n 5.

¹³ Emma Partridge (December 7, 2014), ‘Porn and domestic violence: NSW Police says respect for women from young men crucial’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/porn-and-domestic-violence-nsw-police-says-respect-for-women-from-young-men-crucial-20141207-1205hy.html>.

¹⁴ ABC TV, ‘Family Violence Special’, Q&A, February 23, 2015 (Simon Santosha). Transcript available here: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/ganda/txt/s4173309.htm>.

respect for women and gender equality in the culture. Pornography, which is overwhelmingly features female actors providing sexual gratification to a male audience, is inherently disrespectful to women. A culture in which pornography is thriving cannot be a culture in which true equality and respect can also thrive.

Recommendation

ACL calls on the Royal Commission to recommend greater research into the effects of pornography on consumers. Areas for further research should include:

- The link between pornography consumption and violence against women
- The link between pornography consumption and attitudes towards women
- The link between perpetrators of domestic violence and their pornography consumption

ACL thanks the Royal Commission for considering the views in this submission, and for undertaking this important inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Daniel P. Flynn".

Dan Flynn
Victorian Director
Australian Christian Lobby