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**MYTHS  
ABOUT PORN**



# Reality Check

Promoting children's sexual health, combatting men's violence against women

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## What is Reality Check?

Reality Check is an initiative promoting young people's sexual health and preventing men's violence against women and children. Funded by The Inheritance Fund, the project is a part of Talita's prevention work and aims to increase young people's knowledge about the harms of pornography. Lesson plans and practical tools will assist educators and other professionals working with children to address pornography's influence on young people.

## Who is the target group?

- ✓ young people aged 13-17 years old
- ✓ school teachers, counsellors, school nurses, youth leaders and other professionals working with children and young people
- ✓ parents

Our resources are adapted not only to different target groups, but also different learning types. Written materials, short documentary films, and digital tools will be available once Reality Check's digital platform is launched. Reference groups comprising of our target groups and pilot schools are actively involved in the development and evaluation of Reality Check's resources. We also offer professional development and supervision.

## Reality Check is informed by:

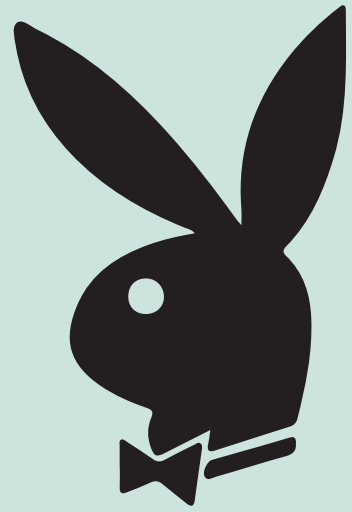
- ✓ WHO's definition of sexual health and sexual rights
- ✓ Sweden's gender equality goals
- ✓ Sweden's national strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women
- ✓ Curriculum for elementary school, preschool, and kindergarten

## Do you want to know more?

Visit our website [www.reality-check.nu](http://www.reality-check.nu) and find us on facebook; Reality Check or @realitycheck.nu on instagram. Contact: [realitycheck@talita.se](mailto:realitycheck@talita.se)

# 01

## “Mainstream porn is like Playboy”



For many adults, the word “porn” is synonymous with men’s magazines like Playboy and Hustler. But what was once considered porn 20-something years ago is now what we see in pop culture, featured in movies, tv-series and advertisements. The internet has profoundly changed the nature of pornography; it is now just a click away, completely anonymous and usually free. Pornography today takes the form of so-called “gonzo porn”, where close-up shots of genitals make viewers feel as if they were the ones enacting the sexualized acts, and where physical and verbal violence is the norm<sup>1</sup>.

Internet pornography’s accessibility, affordability and anonymity constantly draw in new consumers across the globe. It is estimated that 30% of all data transmitted online today is pornographic content. Type “porn” into google and within the span of a few seconds, porn sites with a similar interface to Youtube (e.g. Pornhub, Youporn) are readily available for a viewer’s browsing. 4.6 billion hours of pornographic material is consumed each year through Pornhub alone, the largest online pornography website<sup>2</sup>. These so-called “tube sites” are all owned by Mindgeek, a global company that disguises itself as a business specializing in web design and IT, with no apparent connection to pornography. In reality, Mindgeek is now a monopoly over the production and distribution of pornography, earning its millions in net worth through advertisements on their websites and by offering viewers subscription to pay-sites with more extreme content—that is, content with more elements of violence and humiliation<sup>3</sup>. Like any other capitalistic business, Mindgeek allocates huge sums of money towards advertisements in popular public spaces. In 2015, a large billboard in New York’s Times Square had Pornhub’s advertisement with the slogan “All you need is hand”, with the underlying message that people can find ultimate happiness if they have access to porn. Mindgeek has a vested interest in normalizing pornography while disguising the industry’s exploitative nature, so that the demand for pornography, and thus their profits, increases.

# 02

## “My child doesn’t watch porn”

Today, most children have access to the internet. A 2017 survey in the Swedish context found that 70% of children age 9-12 and 90% of children age over 12 own a computer and/or tablet, while 91% of the 9-12-year-old children and all children older than 12 have access to a smartphone<sup>4</sup>. The implication is that most children have unlimited access to online pornography. Research shows that the average boy begins watching pornography at 12 years old<sup>5</sup>. A study from 2014 found that 98% of all 16-year-old boys and 54% of all 16-year old girls had seen pornography, and 1 in 10 boys reported watching pornography at least once a day<sup>5</sup>. Results from data collected in 2014 found that 1 in 4 boys by the age of 18 watch pornography daily, and that these boys were more likely to have been subject to sexual abuse or to have sexually abused others<sup>6</sup>. Today, children viewing pornography is therefore the rule, rather than the exception.

The changing face of pornography has left many adults lacking an understanding of the type of images that constitute mainstream pornography. Meanwhile, research shows that children generally refrain from speaking with parents or other adults they trust about pornography<sup>7</sup>. This is also a reason why relatively few parents utilize technologies designed to protect their children from pornography—they are unaware that their children are exposed to it. Even if filters are in place in a child’s home, there is a considerable risk that the child will encounter pornography outside of the home, as schools and other public spaces may lack filters that limit children’s exposure to pornography<sup>8</sup>. As society becomes increasingly digitalized, we have an obligation to ensure that digital solutions are put in place to protect children from pornography.



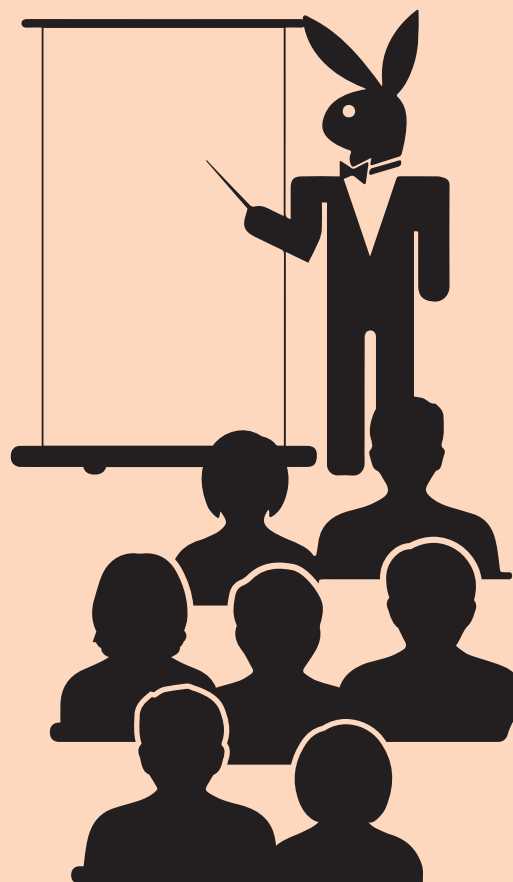
# 03

## “Porn is sex education”

Inadequate sexual education is a reality faced by most children across the globe. Even children who do have access to some form of sexual education have most likely been exposed to pornography long before discussions about respect, consent and bodily integrity take place. This means that the pornography industry has become children’s first and primary sexual educator<sup>9</sup>.

Research shows how pornography’s content shapes viewer’s attitudes, which in turn affect behaviours<sup>10</sup>. What does pornography teach? Mainstream pornography is characterized by violence, sexism, racism and a lack of condom use. Condoms are almost never shown in pornography, as individuals used in its production are expected to engage in unprotected sexualized acts<sup>11</sup>. Pornography cements and reinforces racist stereotypes, with black women being portrayed as having “animal-like” tendencies, Latina women as having “huge asses”, migrant women as being “willing” to have sex in exchange for a residence permit, and asian women as “exotic” and “childlike”<sup>9</sup>. In pornography, violence is also the norm: a study from 2010 found that 9 in 10 of the most popular pornography films contained physical violence, like gagging (when a man penetrates a woman orally to the point that she gags and/or throws up), open-hand slapping, hair pulling and choking<sup>1</sup>. Nearly 50% of all scenes contained verbal aggression, with women being called dehumanizing and derogatory names such as “whore”, “cunt” and “slut”. Virtually all humiliation, aggression and violence in pornography is directed at women by men, and women are coerced into appearing as though they enjoy the sexualized violence.

What do men and boys watching pornography learn? That a “real man” doesn’t need to respect a “no”, that violence is how he will fulfil the harmful masculinity norms that pornography conveys. Young girls are conditioned into thinking that sexual violence is what they should expect during sexual encounters. Pornography thereby promotes and perpetuates destructive masculinity norms, racist stereotypes, and sexualized violence. It fails to teach young people a sexuality based on consent, respect and equality—in fact, it teaches the exact opposite.



# 04

## “Porn doesn’t affect relationships”

Research has identified a correlation between pornography consumption and a generally lower relationship quality<sup>12</sup>. Youth clinics are also seeing a growing trend of so-called “porn-induced erectile dysfunction”, where young men experience delayed ejaculation, an inability to be turned on by real partners, and difficulty getting or maintaining an erection long enough to engage in sex<sup>13</sup>.

Why would viewing pornography lead to these outcomes? Today’s pornography produces a distorted and inaccurate view of how men and women’s bodies look and function. Pornography consumers may become critical towards themselves and their partners, adopting unrealistic and harmful expectations when it comes to appearance and sexual behaviour<sup>14</sup>. Both individuals may end up experiencing a lack of self-esteem, or feel pressured to take part in sexual acts that they are uncomfortable with, believing that these acts are “the norm”. Further, pornography socializes male viewers into seeing women as objects whose task is to sexually please men. Research has found that only 10% of scenes contained positive behaviours like kissing, laughter, embraces; and even those scenes contained on average four aggressive acts<sup>1</sup>. In mainstream pornography, women are reduced to body parts that are to be “pounded”, “blasted”, “stretched”. Translating these messages to real-life relationships, it is no surprise that men in particular are robbed of their ability to experience romance, passion and physical and emotional intimacy with a real partner.



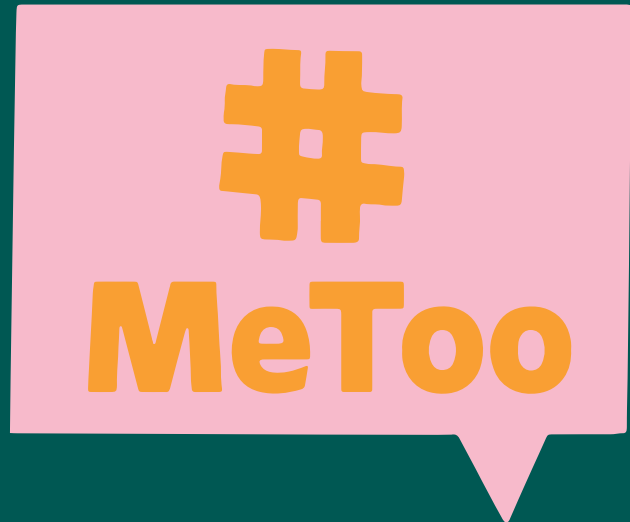


# 05

## “Porn is just fantasy”

People argue that pornography is just a fantasy: “it’s not real”, “it occurs in one’s mind”, “it doesn’t affect people in what we call ‘real life’”. But to make pornography, pornographers use real people who partake in real sexualized acts that have real-life consequences. Unlike violence in Hollywood movies, there is nothing fake about the violence in pornography, and the effects of that violence. Women, of flesh and blood, are forced to endure degrading, dehumanizing and violent sexualized acts. Who is this so-called “fantasy” woman found in pornography? In pornography, her name is “whore”, “dirty slut”, who “gets what she deserves”. Beyond the verbal abuse, she is exposed to extreme and degrading sexual acts. She is spit on, bound up, and beaten. Three or more men penetrate her orally, vaginally, and anally at one time, a so-called “gangbang”. Tears stream down her face as she gags from a penis being violently thrust down her throat, often directly after the man’s penis has been in her or another woman’s anus, with remnants of faeces left on the penis. This act, known as “ATM” or “Ass to mouth”, occurs in approximately 41% of all mainstream pornography scenes<sup>1</sup>. What would be considered sexual violence, brutality and demeaning behaviour in what we call the “real world” is the norm in pornography. And the woman’s task is to pretend that she enjoys anything and everything that is done to her body.

The message conveyed by the pornography industry is that the type of women who exist in pornography want and deserve to be humiliated. But behind titles like “Illegal African girl fucks for food”, “Young porn girl turned into obedient cum dumpster”, and “Teen has sex sessions with daddy” is a real woman or girl, with a real story, who is forced to endure violence, pain and humiliation. Pornography is no figment of the imagination for those involved, and it is no coincidence that the industry recruits young girls who are marginalized, socioeconomically vulnerable and who have already been exposed to various forms of physical and sexual violence<sup>15</sup>. In the eyes of the industry, their vulnerability and lack of alternatives facilitates their exploitation.



# 06

## “Porn doesn’t cause violence”

Hundreds of international studies over the course of 50 years show an undeniable link between pornography consumption among boys and men and increased sexual aggression against women and girls<sup>16</sup>. A meta-analysis, one of the most reliable types of research, from 2016 combining 22 individual studies from seven different countries found a statistically significant relationship between higher porn consumption and increased sexual aggression, regardless of whether the pornography contained explicit physical violence or not<sup>17</sup>. The researchers argue that this is consequence to the objectification and degradation of women, existing even in scenes without explicit physical violence. In another study conducted in 2016 among 4,564 young people aged 14-17 in five European countries, the likelihood of boys committing sexual abuse was found to be significantly positively associated with regular consumption of pornography<sup>18</sup>. The study also found that boys who regularly watch pornography are significantly more prone to having negative gender attitudes. Mainstream pornography thereby contributes to attitudes that trivialize violence against women and behaviours that promote violence against women. Female victims of men’s sexual violence, and the shelters offering women protection, testify that pornography serves as a catalyst and inspiration for men and boys’ sexualized aggression<sup>16</sup>. In light of the #MeToo movement, society cannot afford to overlook pornography as a phenomenon that radicalizes men’s sexualized violence against women and girls.



# 07

## “Porn is sexual liberation for women”

Some claim that pornography is sexually liberating for women. But what does liberation entail? What is it women are to be liberated from? Globally and historically, women’s denial of rights and freedoms and subjection to sexualized violence stems from patriarchy, a system in which men hold power and privilege over women in all realms of society. The unequal distribution of power between the sexes gives men power over women’s lives, bodies and sexuality; from birth, men are socialized to feel entitled to the female body. Traditional gender roles have defined women as passive, submissive and inferior, while men are controlling, aggressive, dominant and superior. Given this context, what does liberation from patriarchy necessitate? The definition of liberation is “the act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression”. Sexual liberation would then require: a departure from traditional gender roles that enable men’s domination of women, an equal distribution of power between men and women, and a strengthening of women’s rights to bodily integrity and freedom from sexualized violence.

The root word of porn, *porne*, means “whore”, “prostitute”, “sexual slave without value”, a revealing definition considering how the industry exploits marginalized and socioeconomically vulnerable girls and women who have already been exposed to various forms of sexualized violence, including prostitution. Pornography is a multinational industry created by men for men, a medium perpetuating the sexualized power imbalance where men are presented as dominant and powerful, and women as submissive and powerless. In pornography, the idea that women do not have the right to say “no”, and enjoy everything men expose them to, no matter how degrading or violent, is reinforced. Thus, to say that pornography is sexually liberating for women ignores the existing patriarchal societal structures. Sexual liberation can never entail someone else’s lack of freedom and oppression; liberation for women requires liberation for all women.



# 08

## “Feminist and LGBTQ-porn promote gender equality”

Some claim that there are certain types of pornography which do not contain humiliation, dehumanization, or violence against women, and which are produced on equal terms. However, films containing this type of content are almost non-existent, and the content claiming to be “feminist” aren’t free, making this type of pornography virtually inaccessible to young people. Further, there exist no tangible empirical evidence validating the idea that so-called feminist, alternative or female-directed pornography is produced under non-coercive circumstances<sup>19</sup>. For example, one female pornographer said, “you could do a porn where a girl is getting choked and hit and spit on, the guy’s calling her a dirty slut and stuff and that’s ok, that can still be feminist as long as everybody there is in control of what they’re doing”<sup>20</sup>. This claim completely ignores the evidence demonstrating the significant vulnerability faced by individuals used in pornography production, and the link between watching pornography and committing sexualized violence. It is telling that research has found that pornography produced by female producers contains just as many degrading and aggressive acts against women as the movies created by men<sup>21</sup>. This is what male adult viewers want to see, and all markets are driven by demand.

The same goes for so-called LGBTQ pornography. Pornography aimed at LGBTQ people is not necessarily gender-equal, norm-critical or non-violent. On the contrary, research shows that the same patterns of harmful gender norms and violence in heteronormative pornography are re-produced in gay pornography<sup>22</sup>. Male gay porn, for instance, is often violent, racist, and contains the same messages about gender, power, and sexualized violence as heterosexual mainstream pornography. Indeed, the power relationships and violence between hypermasculine men and feminine men in gay porn reflect the power relationships between men and women and violence against women in heterosexual porn<sup>22</sup>.

# 09

## “Amateur porn is fine, because no one profits from it”

Many assume that so-called amateur pornography is not commercially produced, and thereby characterized by content that is more equal and doesn't objectify women. However, it is impossible to ensure that amateur pornography has not in fact been produced for commercial purposes, or that everyone involved has agreed to what is being filmed and that it is filmed. As an example, it is not uncommon that sex purchasers pay women in prostitution extra to film the sex purchase, which can then be uploaded online. Amateur pornography is also a specific genre in the porn industry, in most cases just as commercial as other forms of pornography<sup>23</sup>.

Research also shows how amateur pornography maintains the same destructive gender norms as mainstream pornography<sup>24</sup>. In fact, a 2014 study that reviewed 400 of the most popular pornography films found that amateur pornography contained even more violence and objectification of women than other types of pornography<sup>25</sup>.

Further, genres on amateur pornography pages such as "ex-wife", "ex-girlfriend" and "revenge porn" suggest that these films or images have not been created by two consenting parties. Sending nude images and films, termed "sexting", is increasingly commonplace among young people, and these images can easily be spread, ending up on porn sites or used by perpetrators to groom and threaten young girls with the objective of sexual abuse. Globally, women's and girls' shelters report how perpetrators of sexualized violence often film the abuse, using it to threaten the victim and/or spread the images online without their consent.





## “Pornography is not the same as prostitution”

People often differentiate pornography from prostitution; one occurs on film and the other in what we call the “real world”. Yet pornography is just another form of prostitution: “one or more people who perform sexual acts for compensation”. Indeed, pornography and prostitution are not two distinct worlds, as many porn websites earn profits through “live video chats” and ads for escort pages where women are bought and sold<sup>3</sup>. It is no coincidence that most women and girls found online on live video chat come from poor countries, minority groups, or are non-white.

Research shows that, like women in prostitution, women who participate in the production of pornography come from disadvantaged backgrounds, like poverty, childhood sexual abuse, experience living in foster homes, and homelessness<sup>15</sup>. Research also shows that many women exploited in prostitution are used in pornography: in a study of 854 prostituted persons in nine countries, 49% of respondents reported that they had also been used in pornography<sup>26</sup>. In total, 68% of interviewees met clinical criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) equivalent to rape survivors, battered women seeking shelter, war veterans, and refugees of state organized torture. Interestingly, the prostituted persons also used in pornography showed significantly more severe symptoms of PTSD compared to the rest. Survivors of pornography, prostitution and human trafficking report how pornography is a particularly traumatic form of prostitution since the images of their abuse can never be removed from the internet<sup>27</sup>.

The strong link between pornography and prostitution is further evidenced by research on the demand for sex purchase. Studies have found that men who watch pornography are more likely to buy sex, and that sex purchasers wish to imitate or “re-create” what they have seen in pornography with women in prostitution<sup>28</sup>. The latest reports from Swedish police also indicate that the police are arresting increasingly younger men for sex purchase, a phenomenon they associate with the increased and widespread consumption of pornography. “A 15-year-old boy does not just suddenly wake up one morning and decide to buy sex. In our work, we see time and again how the men who purchase sex consume considerable amounts of pornography,” says the former head of Stockholm Police’s Prostitution Unit, Criminal Inspector Simon Häggström<sup>29</sup>. Pornography thus drives the demand for prostitution and human trafficking by increasing men and boy’s tendency to buy women and girls’ bodies.

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# TALITA

## **About Talita**

Talita offers a way out of prostitution, pornography and human trafficking for sexual purposes and into a new life. We work through prevention, outreach and support in Sweden (Stockholm and Gothenburg), Mongolia and Romania.

Our one-year support program is based on a method developed over the 20 years we have worked with our target group. And the method works: 97% of the women who have participated in Talita's support program have left prostitution for good. The Talita-method includes safe housing, trauma therapy, education, case management and integration into society.

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# Reality Check

*10 myths on porn*

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