

The Connections Between Pornography and Sex Trafficking

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By Ana Stutler

We often hear today about the horrors of sex trafficking, overseas and in the United States. We are appalled at those who would hold women and children as sex slaves, deny them their human rights, and make them mere objects for sexual pleasure. At the same time, pornography is tolerated, accepted, openly defended, and even celebrated. [1] Society views sex trafficking as something we ought to combat, yet it sees pornography as simply another genre of entertainment.



This dichotomy between sex trafficking and the realities of pornography is a serious misconception that needs to be addressed. As individuals who seek to oppose sex trafficking, we must understand its linkage to pornography. In this post, we will look at how pornography drives demand for sex trafficking, how victims of trafficking are used in the production of pornography, and finally, we will see that the production of pornography constitutes sex trafficking under current legal definitions.

Porn drives demand for sex trafficking

According to Shared Hope International's [report](#) on the demand for sex trafficking, pornography is the primary gateway to the purchase of humans for commercial sex. Why this is so becomes clear when we think critically about what pornography is and how it affects its consumers.

Pornography [comes from](#) the Greek words *porne*, meaning “prostituted woman” or “prostitution”, and the word *graphos*, meaning “writings.” If we can begin to comprehend that what is depicted in pornography is not simply sex or sexuality, but commercial sexual exploitation, we can begin to rightly appreciate the negative and corrosive effects of this content.

Catherine Mackinon, a feminist professor at Harvard Law School, says that “consuming pornography is an experience of bought sex” and thus it creates a hunger to continue to purchase and objectify, and act out what is seen. [2] And in a very literal way, pornography is advertising for trafficking, not just in general but also in the sense that traffickers and pimps use pornographic images of victims as specific advertising for their “products.” [3]

In addition, viewing pornography and gratifying oneself with it ends up short-circuiting the sexual process. This creates a drug-like addiction which distorts the individual's view on sexuality. It also trains the mind to expect sexual fulfillment on demand, and to continually seek more explicit or violent content to create the same high. [4]

As Victor Malarek put it in his book *The Johns*: "The message is clear: if prostitution is the main act, porn is the dress rehearsal." [5] Pornography becomes a [training ground](#) for johns/tricks. When pornography is the source of sex education for our generation, the natural outcome is [a culture of commercial sex and sex trafficking](#).

Trafficking victims are exploited in the production of pornography

Many women and children who are being sexually exploited and trafficked are also being used for the production of pornography. Sometimes acts of prostitution are filmed without the consent of the victim and distributed. [6] On other occasions victims are trafficked for the [sole purpose of porn production](#). In today's era of webcams and chatrooms, the lines between interactive pornography and virtual prostitution websites have been blurred. [7] According to [Donna Hughes](#), "porn and internet sex shows are markets for trafficked victims." Truly, pornography is another avenue for women to be trafficked. [8]

Porn actors and actresses are often construed as no different from those who chose to have any other career in the entertainment industry. There is little cultural understanding that many of those involved in pornography are otherwise victims of sex trafficking. Despite this lack of general awareness, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), which created our current federal legislation against sex trafficking, it states that people are trafficked into and exploited in pornography. [9]

Porn production is a form of trafficking

Under the TVPA *sex trafficking* is defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act." [10] The realities of the porn industry are perfectly described in the definition of sex trafficking in TVPA.

A commercial sex act is "any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person." [11] Pornography qualifies as a commercial sex act in two ways. First, the production of pornography involves payment of individuals to perform sex acts before a camera. Most performers in the industry are paid for the different films or photo shoots. Because they are produced by recording actual events, real men, women, and children are actually engaging in sexual acts, often repeatedly to get the desired shot. In this way, the production of pornography is without question a case of commercial sex acts, in this case performed on camera.

Secondly, “consuming pornography is an experience of bought sex.” [12] The experience of using pornography is a sexual one for the viewer, or as Catherine Mackinnon put it, “porn is used as sex (masturbation). Therefore it is sex.” [13] Further, it is a commercial sex act in this sense because money or other items of value (clothes, cars, alcohol, drugs, etc.) are exchanged on account of this sexual experience for the consumer. The pornographers are receiving [direct monetary benefit](#) from providing this sexual act.

Recruitment for the porn industry occurs in many ways. [One former porn performer](#) tells of being bombarded with calls to come and perform after posting a personal ad, while others were [recruited through social media](#). According to those who were in the business of pornography, there are times when girls are [held captive on porn sets](#) or [driven under the command of a pornographer or agent](#) to and from the sets, which would fit the definition of “harboring and transporting.” Finally [the provision is tangible](#) in both the physical acts that are documented and the product that is supplied to countless consumers across the world. The porn industry is continually providing the world with commercial sex acts, which can be consumed without end.

At this point, what we have seen is that the production and consumption of pornography fully qualifies as sex trafficking as defined by U.S. federal law. Yet, under the TVPA, only a “severe form of trafficking”—one that involves “force, fraud, or coercion”—can be prosecuted. This is disconcerting to know that in our legal system we tolerate and accept certain instances of sex trafficking. Even so, many instances of porn production do involve some level of force, fraud, or coercion; we just need some political will to investigate and prosecute it. [14]

You do not have to look hard for force in the production of pornography, because even at the surface level, the violence towards the actors involved is evident. Pornographers themselves [describe the violence they perpetrate](#) on their performers without the consent of the actors.

Former porn actress [Jan Meza](#) describes the fraud in the industry. She says that the actors and actresses do not know what they are agreeing to or after their initial agreement they couldn’t get away. Something that should be noted, especially in the case of fraud, but also generally, that [federal law is clear](#) that initial consent does not preclude the possibility of the individual being victimized. Pornographers, like other pimps, learn how to exploit economic and psychological vulnerabilities to coerce them to get into and stay in the sex industry. [15] Other times they [threaten or use alcohol and drugs](#) to induce compliance, which is included in [some state definitions for coercion](#).

The other criteria to establish that a particular case is a severe form of sex trafficking is that the minor is under eighteen years of age. Shared Hope International estimates that [one in five pornographic images online is of a child](#). The prominence of this speaks to the very “severe”

nature of the porn industry. Yet even among the material that is not deemed “child pornography” you can find individuals under the age of eighteen.

Having understood the interconnectedness of pornography and sex trafficking, we must resolve to no longer erect false distinctions between pornography and sex trafficking. In seeking justice for those who are commercially sexually exploited, accepting and using pornography is not an option. It’s time to understand the reality of pornography and act accordingly.

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[1] Mackinnon, Catharine A. “Pornography as Trafficking.” *Pornography: Driving the Demand in International Sex Trafficking*. By David E. Guinn and Julie DiCaro. [Los Angeles]: Captive Daughters Media, 2007. 31-42. Print, 32

[2] Mackinnon, “Pornography as Trafficking,” 34.

[3] Farley, Melissa. *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections*. San Francisco, CA: Prostitution Research & Education, 2007. Print, 153.

[4] Struthers, William M. *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009. Print, 97-99.

[5] Malarek, Victor. *The Johns: Sex for Sale and the Men Who Buy It*. Toronto: Key Porter, 2009. Print, 196.

[6] Smith, Linda, and Cindy Coloma. *Renting Lacy: a Story of America’s Prostituted Children*. Vancouver, WA: Shared Hope International, 2009. Print, 15-25.

[7] Malarek, 203.

[8] Farley, 154

[9] U.S. Dept. of State, Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)2000, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (2001) (enacted). Print, Sec 102 (2).

[\[10\]](#) U.S. Dept. of State, Sec 103 of TVPA 2000 (8) (A), (9).

[\[11\]](#) U.S. Dept. of State, sec 103 (3).

[\[12\]](#) Mackinnon, "Pornography as Trafficking," 34.

[\[13\]](#) MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Only Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996. Print, 17.

[\[14\]](#) U.S. Dept. of State, Sec 103 of TVPA 2000 (8) (A), (9).

[\[15\]](#) Farley, 153.