



“Protecting children from sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse: progress, new frontiers and the path forward”

Contribution from the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ)

The *European Centre for Law and Justice* (ECLJ), An international non-governmental organization founded in 1998 and dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights in Europe and around the world, with special consultative status with the United Nations/ECOSOC since 2007, is honored to submit this contribution to the Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation, and sexual abuse of children.

The ECLJ would like to draw the Special Rapporteur’s attention to a major challenge that remains in the fight against sexual abuse of children: the taboo that still surrounds the link between child exposure to online pornography and sexual abuse. There is an urgent need for awareness on this issue, as it is unacceptable that the fight against all forms of sexual abuse affecting children should be hampered by the existence of such a blind spot. **The ECLJ therefore calls on the Special Rapporteur to take advantage of the draft report to explicitly affirm the link between child exposure to online pornography and sexual abuse, so that all forms of sexual abuse can be recognized and combated.**

In this context, the ECLJ would like to express its sincere gratitude to the Special Rapporteur for addressing the issue of child exposure to pornography and its “*significant impact on a child’s development, leading to trivialization of the phenomenon and distorting what is considered normal sexual interactions*” in her report on “Existing and emerging sexually exploitative practices against children in the digital environment” (2024, A/79/122, §86), in which she indicated that she had taken into account the contribution we had provided her.

This contribution will first show that child exposure to online pornography is a factor in sexual abuse (I) and then that it constitutes a form of sexual abuse (II).

I. CHILD EXPOSURE TO ONLINE PORNOGRAPHY, A FACTOR IN SEXUAL ABUSE

Combating sexual abuse requires tackling its causes. However, child exposure to online pornography appears to be one of the causes of many cases of child sexual abuse, particularly perpetrated by other children. Indeed, a correlation between pornography consumption and sexual violence among young people can be observed, as psychologist Maria Hernandez-Mora states: “*Pornography has an influence on the sexual development of minors, particularly in the reproduction of violent sexual behavior, which directly concerns the issue of sexual violence among minors*”.¹

A. An increase in sexual abuse of minors committed by minors

In general, there is unanimous agreement that the number of minors sexually assaulted by other minors is on the rise. A study conducted in the United States and published in 2020 concluded that 76.7% of male minors and 70.1% of female minors who are victims of sexual abuse are abused by a peer.² In a resolution on pornography, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) notes that “*Law-enforcement authorities have reported a massive spike in cases of harmful sexual behaviour by children*”.³ It is troubling to observe, as the French Ministry of Justice has done, that with a “*significant increase between 1996 and 2018, nearly one in two cases of rape and sexual assault of minors handled by the public prosecutor's office in 2020 involved a minor perpetrator (at the time of the offense)*”,⁴ that is, precisely during the rise of the internet.

B. Minors’ exposure to pornography blamed...

Exposure to pornography may explain this increase. A study that followed adolescents aged 10 to 15 over a three-year period concluded that “*intentional exposure to violent x-rated material over time predicted an almost 6-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually aggressive behavior*”.⁵ Noting the “*alarming trend of children sexually assaulting other children*”, Heidi Olson, Certified Pediatric Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, warns that “*an increasingly common theme [they] are hearing from offenders is that pornography is what led them to harm other children*” and she adds that “*we are losing a precious generation of kids who believe sexual*

¹ Maria Hernandez-Mora, « L’influence de la consommation de pornographie sur le mineur consommateur », in Olivia Sarton and Claire de Gatellier (dir.), *Violences sexuelles entre mineurs : agir, prévenir, guérir... Les spécialistes répondent*, Artège, 2023, p.121 (our translation).

² Gewirtz-Meydan A, & Finkelhor D (2020). Sexual abuse and assault in a large national sample of children and adolescents. *Child Maltreatment*, 25(2), 203-214.

³ PACE, For an assessment of the means and provisions to combat children’s exposure to pornographic content, Resolution 2429 (2022), §3.

⁴ Marie Romero, *La prise en charge des mineurs auteurs d’infractions à caractère sexuel à la protection judiciaire de la jeunesse*, [Research report](#), Ministry of Justice, October 2022 (our translation) ; République française, « Mineurs auteurs d’infractions sexuelles : quelle prise en charge ? », *Vie publique*, 23 January 2023.

⁵ Ybarra ML, Mitchell KJ, Hamburger M, Diener-West M, Leaf PJ. X-rated material and perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior among children and adolescents: is there a link? *Aggress Behav*. 2011 Jan-Feb;37(1):1-18. doi: 10.1002/ab.20367. PMID: 21046607

violence is the norm”.⁶ Another testimony from a scientific journal supports this view: “*The patients we see frequently mention repeated exposure to or even heavy use of pornography, as in the case of Mohamed, 15 (...), who is under investigation for sexually assaulting girls at his school and raping two of his neighbors who are under 10 years old*”.⁷ Maria Hernandez-Mora reports that “*Juvenile court judges in Spain and Denmark say that since the advent of pornography—and especially smartphones, which have found their way into children's pockets—sexual assaults among minors have skyrocketed. For example, studies have found that one in six boys aged 14 to 18 has already choked his partner or slapped her in the face (Jones, 2018)*”.⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, noted in her May 2024 report that “*The regular exposure of children to pornography has also been linked to the quadrupling of underaged victims of sexual offences over the past decade, where the victims are mainly girls*”.⁹

In general, the PACE has thus affirmed that early exposure to pornography “*can lead to sexual violence*”,¹⁰ while a report presented to the PACE further highlighted that « *Watching porn frequently [...] can be traced back in the lives of convicted perpetrators. Amongst high rate consumers of porn, sexual aggression is much more likely to occur.*”¹¹ Finally, “*adolescent porn use increases the development of intrapsychic sexual scripts, which contain ambiguous communication or sexual aggression.*”¹²

The increase in sexual abuse of minors committed by minors is not surprising given the violent nature of pornography and the characteristics of the adolescent brain.

⁶ See Iulia-Elena Cazan, Activists at UN Connect Trafficking to P*rn, [C-Fam](#), 2 August 2024; Kristen A. Jenson, Sexual Assault Nurse Links Porn to Child-on-Child Abuse: Interview with National Expert Heidi Olson, [Defend Young Minds](#), April 21, 2020.

⁷ Barbara Smaniotto, « Réflexions autour de l’impact de la pornographie... sur la sexualité adolescente », *Revue de l'enfance et de l'adolescence*, 2017/1 (n° 95), p. 47-56. See also: Juristes pour l'enfance & Famille et Liberté, *Violences sexuelles entre mineurs – Agir, Prévenir, Guérir*, Colloque, 28 novembre 2022 ([Dossier de presse](#)) ; Center for Family and Human Rights, [Dismantling the Pornography Industry and Making the Internet Safe for Children](#), 23 February 2022: In Kansas City, it was found that half of the perpetrators of sexual violence against girls under the age of 10 were boys aged 11 to 15, and it is believed that the cause is exposure to pornography.

⁸ Maria Hernandez-Mora, « L’influence de la consommation de pornographie sur le mineur consommateur », op. cit., p.134 (our translation).

⁹ A/HRC/56/48, Prostitution and violence against women and girls, §21.

¹⁰ PACE, Fighting the over-sexualisation of children, Resolution 2119 (2016), 21 June 2016, §2.

¹¹ PACE, Gender aspects and human rights implications of pornography, Report, Doc. 15406, 18 November 2021, §24. See Vanessa Vega, Neil M. Malamuth, “Predicting sexual aggression: the role of pornography in the context of general and specific risk factors”, *Aggressive Behaviour*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, March/April 2007, pp 104-117 ; DOI: Frequent users of pornography. A population based epidemiological study of Swedish male adolescents», Carl Göran Svedin, Ingrid Åkerman, Gisela Priebeb, *Journal of Adolescence*, 2011.

¹² PACE, Gender aspects and human rights implications of pornography, Report, Doc. 15406, 18 November 2021, §25. See Isabell Schuster, Paulina Tomaszewska, Barbara Krahé, “Changing Cognitive Risk Factors for Sexual Aggression: Risky Sexual Scripts, Low Sexual Self-Esteem, Perception of Pornography, and Acceptance of Sexual Coercion”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2020 ; Kara Anne E. Rodenhizer, Katie M. Edwards, “The Impacts of Sexual Media Exposure on Adolescent and Emerging Adults’ Dating and Sexual Violence Attitudes and Behaviors: A Critical Review of the Literature”, *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 2019.

1. ... due to the pervasive violence in pornographic content

It is well known that violence is omnipresent in pornography. According to an analysis of the 50 most popular pornographic videos, 88% of scenes contain physical violence and 49% contain at least one instance of verbal abuse¹³. In the documentary *Pornocratie : les nouvelles multinationales du sexe*, actresses testify to the increase in this violence: “*It’s become more brutal, people have gone crazy, much crazier than before.*”¹⁴ By contributing to the normalization of rape and violence, viewing pornographic videos is thus a risk factor for sexual offenses.¹⁵ In 1993, the European Parliament acknowledged thus that “*pornography is an affront to human dignity and stimulates certain symptoms of undesirable social behaviour, particularly against women.*”¹⁶

2. ... due to the characteristics of the brain of minors

Minors’ brains are still developing until the age of 25, according to scientists. They are highly sensitive to dopamine (the pleasure hormone), and the role of mirror neurons, which are strongly activated by exposure to pornography, has also been highlighted. While these neurons enable children to develop “*on the one hand, through behaviors learned by imitation, and on the other hand, through the empathetic mother-child relationship,*” their significant activation “*facilitates the imitation of pornographic content among adolescents with their peers and, on the other hand, reduces empathy. This empathic disconnection can promote aggressive behavior among minors (and also among adults) and also call into question the notion of consent.*”¹⁷

II. CHILD EXPOSURE TO ONLINE PORNOGRAPHY: A FORM OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The act of intentionally exposing a child to pornographic material is clearly a form of sexual abuse. However, exposing a child to online pornography, especially when this exposure is unintentional, is already a form of sexual abuse:¹⁸ while the intention may differ, the act of exposure remains the same and has similar consequences.

13 Ana J. Bridges, Robert Wosnitzer, Erica Scharrer, Chyng Sun, Rachael Liberman, “Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update”, *Violence against Women* 16, no. 10 (2010): 1065-1085.

14 FigaroLIVE, *On ne parle que de ça*, with Charlotte Barrillon-Dennebouy : [Ovidie : « On a atteint un stade de violence inouïe dans le porno »](#), 13 January 2017.

15 Consider the extreme but nonetheless notable examples of Theodore Robert Bundy and Arthur Gary Bishop, serial killers and consumers of pornography and child pornography: in Victor B. Cline, “Pornography’s Effects on Adults and Children”, *Morality in Media*, 2001.

16 European Parliament, Resolution on Pornography, December 17, 1993, Official Journal of the European Communities No. C 20/547 of January 24, 1994, cons. A.

17 Maria Hernandez-Mora, « L’influence de la consommation de pornographie sur le mineur consommateur », op. cit., p.129-130 (our translation).

18 See François-Xavier Bellamy (Member of the European Parliament), [Lutter contre l’exposition massive des mineurs à la pornographie](#), Youtube, 16.06.2023 ; Céline Imart, « [Les sites pornographiques ne doivent plus être des espaces de non-droit en Europe](#) », *Le Figaro*, 21.03.2024.

A. Child exposure to pornography falls under the definition of sexual abuse.

Child exposure to pornography falls under the definition of sexual abuse. The author Pierre Collart defines sexual abuse as “*any sexual interaction involving a person or persons who do not consent to it. [...] Sexual abuse therefore includes all acts directed at the victim's physical intimacy, which assault their sensory sphere and/or use their body. These include verbal and non-verbal forms, gestures, visual acts, exhibitionism, voyeurism [...]*”.¹⁹ Acts that do not involve contact with the genital area can also constitute sexual abuse.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child sexual abuse is “*the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society*”.²⁰ The UN General Secretariat defines sexual abuse as “*the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions*”.²¹

Many childhood professionals (educators, psychologists, etc.) compare the unintentional exposure of children to pornography, accounting for more than 40% of first encounters with it,²² to “psychological rape”. This was the view expressed by professionals who spoke at conferences on the subject of minors’ exposure to pornography and its dangers, organized by the European Parliament and in which ECLJ participated. This was particularly emphasized during the conference entitled “Child exposure to pornography: a form of child abuse?”, organized on 10 June 2025, by MEP Margarita de la Pisa Carrión (Spain). It is indeed a “*shock [that] is akin to psychological stupefaction, because the child does not have the keys or the maturity to integrate these images, which are far removed from what he or she, in his or her childish imagination, could imagine about sexuality and the adult body.*”²³

It is not by chance that in French law, Article 227-24 of the Penal Code, which punishes the exposure of minors to pornography with three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 75,000 euros, appears in a paragraph on “*sexual offences committed against minors*”, itself belonging to a section dealing with “*endangering minors*” in a title on “*offences against the human person*”.

B. Child exposure to pornography and the consequences of sexual abuse

Like any sexual abuse, children’s exposure to pornography can cause serious psychological, physical and behavioral damage. Research shows that “*the disturbances induced by the viewing of this type of program by young children [can] lead to psychic and behavioral disturbances*”

¹⁹ Collart, Pierre. « L’abus sexuel : discussion de la définition, éléments de diagnostic et de prévention », *Service social*, volume 63, numéro 1, 2017, p.29–42 (our translation).

²⁰ WHO and International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, *Preventing Child Maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence*, 2006, p.10.

²¹ Secretary-General’s Bulletin, Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, 9 October 2003, [ST/SGB/2003/13*](#)

²² See Maria Hernandez-Mora, « L’influence de la consommation de pornographie sur le mineur consommateur », *op. cit.*, p.123-124.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

similar to those of sexual abuse".²⁴ If unintentional exposure of children to pornography is comparable to psychological rape, this finding is hardly surprising.

Early viewing of pornography is not without consequences, as recognized by the PACE, which said it was *"alarmed by the unprecedented exposure of children to pornographic imagery, which is detrimental to their psychological and physical development"*.²⁵ In fact, it *"brings increased risks of harmful gender stereotyping, addiction to pornography, early and unhealthy sexual relationships, as well as difficulties with developing balanced, respectful relationships in future life"*; similarly, it *"results in the blurring of the boundaries of normal curiosity towards sexuality and those of socially acceptable behaviour, and it undermines respect for human dignity, privacy and physical integrity"*.²⁶ On the other hand, *"Recent studies have analysed the impact of pornography on young people's behaviour and attitudes, highlighting mostly its negative effects regarding gender equality. As teenage years are a time for young people to develop an image of themselves and to discover their sexuality, this impact can be deep and lifelong"*.²⁷

Young people's exposure to pornography thus increases the likelihood that they will accept and adopt harmful and risky sexual behavior, both for themselves and for others: sexual activity at an earlier age,²⁸ sexting,²⁹ multiple sexual partners, deviant sexual practices, use of psychoactive substances and vulnerability to STIs.³⁰

It also causes serious psychological damage to children. Overall, *"research suggests that children who consume pornography [...] have lower levels of social integration and higher levels of undesirable behavior. They also have a higher incidence of depressive symptoms and reduced emotional bonds with their parents"*.³¹ The "perfect" bodies shown in this content are likely to give rise to complexes³²: Maria Hernandez-Mora refers to *"the development of a kind of dysmorphophobia, that is, a rejection of the body as it is, with significant body image issues. (...) These are also the observations of plastic surgeons, who tell me that the emergence of these complexes at such a young age is a recent phenomenon, with requests for early and surprising*

²⁴ L'environnement médiatique des jeunes de 0 à 18 ans : Que transmettons-nous à nos enfants ? Rapport en réponse à la mission confiée par Ségolène Royal, Ministre déléguée à la Famille, à l'Enfance et aux Personnes handicapées au Collectif Interassociatif Enfance Médias (CIEM), May 2002, p. 39.

²⁵ PACE, For an assessment of the means and provisions to combat children's exposure to pornographic content, Resolution 2429 (2022), §2.

²⁶ Ibid., §2-3.

²⁷ PACE, Gender aspects and human rights implications of pornography, Report (15406), §18.

²⁸ "Les adolescents et le porno : vers une "Génération Youporn" ?", IFOP study for the Observatoire de la Parentalité et de l'Education Numérique, conducted from February 21 to 27, 2017 among 1,005 people representative of the population aged 15 to 17 living in metropolitan France, p. 11: "71% of teens who have already had sex have "already surfed a pornographic site in their lifetime". As a reminder, the average for all teenagers is 51%".

²⁹ In Poland, around a quarter of 16-year-olds surveyed (23.5%) have sent such sexually explicit photos or videos of themselves to others: R. Lange, M. Błażej, F. Konopczyński, A. Ładna, *Nastolatki wobec pornografii cyfrowej - Trajektorie użytkowania*, Thinkstat NASK - Ogólnopolska Sieć Edukacyjna, Warszawa 2022, pp. 29-35. Maria Hernandez-Mora points out that this is a "branch of pornography."

³⁰ Elizabeth M. Morgan, "Associations between Young Adults' Use of Sexually Explicit Materials and Their Sexual Preference, Behaviors, and Satisfaction", *The Journal of Sex Research* 48, no. 6 (2011): 520-530.

³¹ R. Lange, M. Błażej, F. Konopczyński, A. Ładna, *Nastolatki wobec pornografii cyfrowej - Trajektorie użytkowania*, Thinkstat NASK - Ogólnopolska Sieć Edukacyjna, Warszawa 2022, op. cit., p.4 (our translation).

³² 01net, "Exclusif (IFOP) - 8 Français sur 10 doutent de l'efficacité du blocage des sites X", IFOP study for 01net carried out by online self-administered questionnaire from April 13 to 17, 2023 on a sample of 2,006 people, representative of the French population aged 18 and over: note the 17-point increase among young men compared with 2013.

surgery. For example, teenage girls are asking for vaginal lip surgery.”³³ Early exposure to pornography leads to the development of unrealistic and distorted expectations of sexuality and misleading attitudes towards relationships. It has detrimental effects “on their self-esteem, well-being, relationships, equal opportunities and achievements in school. In some cases, it can lead to sexual violence and be severely detrimental to their physical and mental health”.³⁴ Thus, in its Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health (7 June 2023), the European Commission stated that, concerning children and young people, “This includes: protecting them from inappropriate content”,³⁵ [the summary report](#) of this Communication expressly refers to pornography as one of the harmful effects of social media against which the at-risk group of children and adolescents must be protected (p. 6).

C. Child exposure to pornography and the responsibility of pornographic industry

The technology sector bears a huge responsibility when it comes to children’s exposure to online pornography. In particular, the pornography industry is well aware that children are currently being exposed to this type of content unintentionally, but also that many others are consulting it voluntarily.

‘Children’ is synonymous with ‘money’ for this industry, which seems to feel no qualms about sacrificing the younger generation on the altar of profit. As a report by the Ennocence association has shown, “the porn industry’s ferocious marketing” and “various techniques used by [it] to attract Internet users against their will”, including children, are particularly at issue (advertising clicks, clandestine sites, use of hidden keywords, downloading, streaming and live streaming illegal websites)³⁶. Exposure of minors to online pornography is a major source of revenue for the industry: on the order of \$789 million a year, including around \$147 million generated by accidental exposure, not to mention the fact that these minors are tomorrow’s customers.³⁷ An ARCOM study showed that “minors represent 12% of the audience of ‘adult’ sites, 17% of Pornhub’s audience”.³⁸

Conclusion

While child exposure to online pornography appears to constitute both a form of sexual abuse and a risk factor for the commission of sexual abuse against other children, it is necessary to prevent children from viewing pornographic content by any means possible, in order to avoid

³³ Maria Hernandez-Mora, « L’influence de la consommation de pornographie sur le mineur consommateur », op. cit., p.133 (our translation).

³⁴ PACE, Fighting the over-sexualisation of children, Resolution 2119 (2016), 21 June 2016, §2.

³⁵ European Commission, Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, COM(2023) 298 final, 7 June 2023, p.10.

³⁶ Ennocence, Réseaux sociaux, streaming, live streaming et téléchargement illégal : nouvelles portes d’entrée des enfants vers le monde de la pornographie, premier pas vers une sensibilisation de notre société sur ces sujets, 2016, p.21-25 (our translation).

³⁷ Ibid., p.13.

³⁸ ARCOM, La fréquentation des sites « adultes » par les mineurs, May 2023, p. 23.

as far as possible the resulting trauma and the reproduction of behaviours seen in this type of content.

In this context, it is particularly interesting to note that the European Parliament seems to have recently acknowledged the link between child exposure to pornography and sexual abuse during the first reading of the proposal to recast the European Directive of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, as well as child pornography. On 17 June 2025, MEPs adopted this proposal, which included the following provisions:³⁹

- “2. Causing, for sexual purposes, a child who has not reached the age of sexual consent, *or a child who is above the age of sexual consent and does not consent* to witness sexual activities, ***including by exposing that child to pornographic content***, even without having to participate, shall be punishable by a maximum term of imprisonment of at least 1 year.” (Article 3 § 2).

A new Recital 15 a also refers to it: “***In order to achieve greater protection for children online and to reinforce preventive measures, also the intentional conduct of exposing children to pornographic content, for sexual purposes, should be criminalised.***”

- “***2a. Disseminating pornographic content online without putting in place robust and effective age verification tools to effectively prevent children from accessing pornographic content online shall be punishable by a maximum term of imprisonment of at least 1 year***” (New article 3 § 2a).

By requiring all EU Member States to penalise such behaviour, this text would protect children on an equal footing across Europe. It would oblige platforms distributing pornographic content on European territory to implement strict age verification measures, under penalty of criminal sanctions.

It is therefore to be hoped that these provisions will survive the interinstitutional negotiations to which the text must be subjected, so that they can ultimately be definitively adopted.

³⁹ The expressions in italics below correspond to the amendments adopted at first reading. See the [procedure file](#), particularly the [Decision by Parliament, 1st reading](#).