

POSITION STATEMENT ON PORNOGRAPHY

Key messages:

Sexual Assault Centre London (SACL) promotes a sex-positive approach to understanding issues related to sexuality. Individuals make choices about how they want to express their sexuality, and sexual freedom is an essential component of women's freedom.

- We recognize that certain forms of pornography (porn) offer violent depictions of sex that are degrading and harmful to women. Conversely, other forms of porn (e.g. feminist porn) offer diverse representations of what sex can include, that expand our understandings and provide for greater inclusion for those who have been minoritized.
- **The key to battling the influence of harmful forms of porn is not to call for the banning of all porn.** This conflates all porn under the same umbrella, and denies individuals access to sexual expression and manifestations of sexual diversity. Patriarchy has sought to limit women's sexuality to certain condoned outlets (e.g. within heterosexual marriage; through slut-shaming). SACL refuses to further oppress women's sexuality by calling for the elimination of all porn.
- We believe that the way to counteract harmful forms of porn is to **engage in frank public education and discussion about all porn and its connection to female sexuality**, to develop a critical lens on the issue.

“The answer to bad pornography is good pornography, not no pornography” (Dodson).

Reasoning:

Sexual Assault Centre London promotes a sex-positive approach. We support an analysis that acknowledges women's sexual agency and ability to make choices. This means that we do not demonize women for making choices about how they want to express their sexuality, and we trust that when individuals have accurate information they can make decisions for themselves. Patriarchy has controlled women's sexuality, has stipulated what sexual expression is deemed acceptable from women, and has positioned women's sexuality as rooted in male sexual satisfaction. We believe that in celebrating women's sexuality we have a better chance of addressing sexual violence.

SACL distinguishes between types of porn: mainstream porn and alternative porn.

Much, although not all, of mainstream porn (free, readily accessible porn) is heteronormative and includes representations of female sexuality that are passive, focused on male pleasure, and often



degrading. Other forms of porn are unequivocally harmful to women¹. We call attention to how these forms of porn are implicated in sexual violence directed in particular at women.

SACL believes that porn involving children under the age of 18 constitutes child pornography, and we support the current laws that address this harm.

In much of mainstream porn, we do not see authentic and realistic expression of female pleasure, such as women reaching orgasm; we rarely see the use of condoms, queer/LGBTQ sex acts, sex between individuals with bodies that are differently sized, differently abled and sex through a female gaze.

These forms of sex are found in alternative porn. SACL also calls attention to the forms of porn that offer positive representations of female sexual empowerment, often termed 'alternative', feminist or queer porn. These forms of porn offer a panoply of sex acts, are inclusive of sexual diversity, and present women as active and consenting participants in sexual encounters. Many women, queer & trans folk have found a sense of possibility when watching these forms of porn-expanding understandings of sex, providing a form of sexual education that is anti-oppressive and inclusive.

Overall, alternative porn does not present sex acts or sexual power dynamics that are harmful to women. We may be uncomfortable with the notion of supporting porn, but it is incredibly important to distinguish which porn we are talking about. A harm-reduction approach can result in our advocating against mainstream porn. A harm-reduction approach cannot similarly be applied to most of alternative porn.

Placing restrictions on sexual expression through porn will not eliminate sexual violence, and it will contribute towards further controlling women's sexuality. Supporting critical thinking around what messages are conveyed through different forms of porn will help to support healthy, equally and inclusive understandings of sexuality. This is part of creating our world without sexual violence.

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¹ Gonzo, for example, is a form of violent porn that arose out of a desensitization by viewers to certain sexual acts, and thus it includes an increase in the portrayal of acts involving extreme violence and degradation against women.