

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Misogyny: the manosphere and online content, HC 867

Wednesday 9 July 2025

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Women and Equalities Committee members present: Sarah Owen (Chair); Alex Brewer; David Burton-Sampson; Rosie Duffield; Kirith Entwistle; Natalie Fleet; Catherine Fookes; Christine Jardine; Rebecca Paul; Rachel Taylor.

Science, Innovation and Technology Committee member present: Emily Darlington.

Questions 155 - 194

Witness

[I](#): Baroness Gabrielle Bertin, Lead Reviewer of the Independent Porn Review.

Examination of witness

Witness: Baroness Bertin.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today we are holding an evidence session on online pornography as part of our inquiry “Misogyny: the manosphere and online content”. I am really glad that we will be joined by Baroness Gabrielle Bertin, lead reviewer of the independent review into the regulation of online pornography. Thank you so much for being here. I know that we have a number of young people with us today as well, including the former youth mayor of Milton Keynes, so welcome and thank you very much for joining us.

Baroness Bertin, we are grateful to you for coming to talk to us today about online pornography and the impact it has on misogyny and violence against women and girls in the real world. We understand that some people may find today’s evidence session really distressing and difficult to hear, but there are several organisations that can offer support, including Childline, Women’s Aid and the Samaritans. If anybody feels they need to dip out for a few minutes and then come back in, or just dip out and not come back—apart from you, Baroness Bertin—then please feel free to do so. Thank you so much. I am going to hand over to David first.

Q155 **David Burton-Sampson:** Welcome, Baroness Bertin. What does the academic research tell us about whether there is a link between viewing pornography and committing violent and/or sexual crimes?

Baroness Bertin: First, I want to thank you all very much for having me here today. The review was published back in February, and of course, as is often the case with reviews like this, the work has started in earnest to try to get the Government to actually implement the recommendations. I feel a huge responsibility to young women and men to push that forward.

In answer to your question, David, in the course of the review, we put out a very big call for evidence. For over 20 years there has been absolutely no doubt about the correlation between watching violent pornography and the change in people’s sexual scripts, and it is definitely making a difference in what people do in their day-to-day lives. We had some very powerful pieces of evidence. We did not set up the research ourselves—that was not within the remit of the review—but I was very keen to have all those global bits of evidence, together with the evidence we already had in this country, in one place to be able to tell the story that this is having a big effect on society. Certainly, I feel 100% able to sit here and say that it is, without doubt, a key driver in the increased violence against women and girls that we are seeing.

Q156 **David Burton-Sampson:** You said “violent pornography”. Is there a link for people who watch any type of pornography?



Baroness Bertin: We have to get out into the open quite early on in this session that people are watching online pornography. Nobody is going to a licensed sex shop to get a DVD or a magazine off the top shelf any more; the whole arena has changed completely. The truth is, if you are watching online pornography, you can pretty much be reassured that there is a fairly high chance that you are watching violent pornography. It is argued that 88% shows content that is verbally or physically violent towards women. By the way, that content would simply not be allowed offline; the BBFC would not classify that kind of content. However, that level of extremity and violence online, which would not be allowed offline, is at large and being watched at such a scale.

That is the other thing that I want to reiterate early on in this session: 13.8 million people a month are watching violent pornography—or pornography, I should say, but in the context of what I have just set out about this extreme misogynistic, degrading and violent content. Another very shocking statistic is that a couple of years ago, one site had 34 billion views in one year. That is the scale we are talking about; it is absolutely huge. If this was a niche issue that only a small section of society was dealing with, then it would be suboptimal that there was so much bad and awful content on there, but it is not a niche issue; it is widespread.

Q157 **David Burton-Sampson:** Why do you think there is a lack of studies on whether there is a casual link between viewing pornography and harmful sexual behaviours?

Baroness Bertin: I do not really think there is a lack of studies. We have brought together quite a few very strong studies. I cannot bear listing things off, but I can very easily give you a few examples, given that you have asked me very specifically. Even in 2020, the UK Government did a very compelling report that recognised that there was substantial evidence of an association between the use of pornography and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women. A 2015 peer-reviewed research study that analysed—this is important to note—22 different studies from seven different countries said, “There is little doubt that, on average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes supporting sexual aggression and engage in acts of sexual aggression.”

The other thing that brought it home to me, in a way that I cannot really describe and has had an impact and cut-through nationally, is that 38% of women are now strangled in sex. How have we allowed that to happen? It is totally shocking. We will probably come on to it, but that is the one recommendation that the Government have so far confirmed: they will criminalise pornography depicting sex and strangulation. It has become so mainstream 100% because it has been viewed so much on pornography sites—and, I should add, social media.

Q158 **David Burton-Sampson:** Should the Government be commissioning and funding more research in this area? If they were to do so, how would



they do it ethically?

Baroness Bertin: We always want more research and data, especially when we are talking about AI and how we could try to develop technologies that could be useful in this regard. If Taylor Swift can get her music stripped from websites and Spotify, we can definitely come up with technologies that could make the situation better if we put our minds to it. It would be great for the Government to commission more research into this, but what would be helpful—it is one recommendation I would draw your attention to in the review—is for the police to start recording a lot more data, particularly when people are either arrested or charged with crimes of a sexually violent nature. There should be far more correlation and understanding about what they have been viewing on their screens; we should be keeping a much better note of data on that front. Dame Elish Angiolini made a hugely important point: Sarah Everard’s murderer had been watching such violent pornography in the run-up to her terrible death. It would be a very useful exercise for the police to be recording far more data in that regard.

Q159 **Chair:** For that level of recording, would it be helpful to classify misogyny as a hate crime, in order for it to reach a certain threshold for the police to take it seriously, or is there something that we could do separately?

Baroness Bertin: Whether it should be recorded as a hate crime is such a difficult issue. I have thought about it a great deal. I like to think I am a pragmatic woman who wants to do things that are going to make a difference. I am not sure if categorising it as a hate crime would necessarily reduce the situation; it might end up almost making things more difficult for the police. However, a very important starter, which the last Government said they would do, would be, at the very least, to record rates of crimes of a misogynistic nature so that we can start to understand the real pattern of activity.

Q160 **Chair:** That might be difficult to implement without having a standard definition for all police forces to use of what constitutes, for example, misogynistic content. Are there any useful international examples?

Baroness Bertin: Internationally, there are certain countries that have definitely been—how can I put it?—more engaged, perhaps not specifically around whether misogyny is a hate crime, but on this issue generally. For example, France has had to be engaged because it was hit by one of the worst sexual violence scandals in recent history—probably in history ever—with the Pelicot case. I wrote in my foreword that there is absolutely no doubt that pornography getting more and more extreme led to that extraordinary situation in France. Certainly, French politicians are starting to engage quite aggressively. Pornhub left France for a period of time; it is now back, but France is definitely keen to be very proactive on this issue.

Obviously, I applaud and support any Government that set targets, as this Government have done to halve violence against women and girls by



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50% over 10 years. However, if they do not implement a great deal of the preventive measures in the violence against women and girls strategy, which I understand will now come after recess rather than before, then that is a big problem for me. The prevention has to be thought about in a much more sensible and urgent way. This review is really all about prevention. The reason I accepted the role was that I did a lot of work on the Domestic Abuse Bill. We all make these speeches in Parliament—I am sure you guys do too—and then you think to yourself, “This is all potentially a waste of time if we don’t actually stop this kind of readily and freely available content and stop sending a signal that says, actually, violence against women and girls is totally okay.”

Chair: It is good that we have come on to prevention, because one of the areas that we want to look at is the impact of pornography and violent pornography on children.

Q161 **Rebecca Paul:** Baroness Bertin, thank you for your time today and for all your work on this really important topic. Can you talk us through the academic research there is about the impact of watching pornography on children specifically?

Baroness Bertin: Let us just start with the statistics about what children have seen over the past, we have to assume, 10, 15 or possibly even 20 years. Talk about dereliction of duty: how have we allowed that to happen to our children? There has been an 81% rise in sexual assaults between children. These kinds of figures are harrowing. The anecdotal evidence that we got during the review was sometimes the most pointed and difficult to absorb. A headmistress recounted how a young boy of 15 or so had raped one of his fellow pupils in the playground. Waiting for the police to come, he was sobbing in the headteacher’s office and, of course, said, “Well, look, I just didn’t realise it was wrong. I thought that was what sex was.” I am not for a second excusing that, but it is those sorts of anecdotal examples—of porn re-enactments, education via pornography—that, frankly, teachers across the country will be able to tell you about.

As I said in response to the original question, the standards are not there on online pornography sites. No child should be learning anything from a pornography site. I cannot really overstate what a very difficult situation it is for children who have been viewing pornography thus far. Obviously, age verification will kick in—we may talk about that later—and we hope it will be a success, but we have to be very aware of the damage that has already been done, which is why education is so important as well.

Q162 **Rebecca Paul:** It is really shocking. We have to remember that children learn from what they are seeing, and a lot of them have a smartphone in their pocket and it is available 24/7.

Baroness Bertin: Typically, I cannot find my page of statistics now and my eyesight is failing, but I must reiterate, and I am sure the Committee will know, that the amount of pornography found by children on social



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media is a big problem. If there are social media sites that, in their terms of reference, do not allow pornography and yet by various means—you know how it works—pornography is still getting on there, it remains unclear to me how age verification is going to work in that regard. That is still going to be an area of deep concern. I probably would want an outright ban for under-16-year-olds, but much greater regulation needs to be put upon social media and the access that children get for a whole variety of reasons, not just pornography.

Q163 Chair: A survey of 1,000 young people aged between 16 and 21 commissioned by the Children's Commissioner found that social media sites are where young people most frequently access pornographic content. The BBFC found that 60% of children aged 11 to 13 who had seen pornography had viewed it unintentionally.

Baroness Bertin: Of course, I hope age verification really will stop children who have accidentally gone on to pornography sites or are on social media finding pornography, but clearly, with age verification we have to be careful that the platforms do not think, "Right. Well, we put the front door in place, so the standards and what gets seen behind the front door don't matter." I have no doubt that a pioneering 15-year-old will find their way on to porn sites, but we certainly hope that it will improve the situation.

Q164 Rebecca Paul: What impact is porn consumption having on girls, both as consumers and in relation to boys' consumption of it? Also, what is the impact on boys?

Baroness Bertin: That is a very good question; I am glad you have asked it. I came to this as a campaigner wanting to end violence against women and girls. That has not changed at all, but I suppose my big takeaway was really, "My goodness, boys are huge victims in all this as well." You could argue that, having seen this stuff and somehow been influenced by it, their future lives have been incredibly damaged. What a confusing world it is for boys at the moment. On the one hand, there are quite rightly huge amounts of emphasis on positive masculinity, and yet there is this subterranean world where anything goes, and if they have the misfortune of finding that stuff, or indeed actively looking for it, which they absolutely can right now, that is doing them such a huge disservice as well.

Q165 Rebecca Paul: Are you seeing any evidence that girls are becoming or having to become more accepting of the treatment? You have already talked about some of the awful things that we see portrayed in pornography.

Baroness Bertin: I think it is just changing the way young people view sex. This is anecdotal and I cannot necessarily point to an academic study, but to a degree, I imagine some girls will be thinking, "God, I don't want any of that, thank you very much. If that's what it's about, no thanks." Obviously, there will be girls who think, "Well, that's how I



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should act; that's what I should find pleasurable." We are basically allowing an industry to educate our young people on what sex is. That is the big problem we have, because that is not something that we have signed up to. That is not something that is remotely right and proper.

By the way, this is not a moral crusade. I am not for a second trying to put morals on to this. It is just a shout-out to say, "Look, something has to be done about this because it is just not right that we are not putting those guardrails in place." All this is about is making sure that there is the same set of regulations in place online for offline, given the huge scale of people watching this kind of content now.

Q166 **Rebecca Paul:** Did you hear anything specifically from young lesbians on this?

Baroness Bertin: We did, but I cannot remember exactly what we heard. Queer pornography was something we touched on, but I would have to remind myself. It was generally seen that heterosexual pornography is where the very big problems are. There was some gay pornography that was also problematic, but generally the violence was always male violence, sometimes on men but generally male on female.

Q167 **Chair:** There is virtually no age verification at the moment; as you say, there is an open door to many of the sites. If we are seeing it on social media then age verification is even less likely to occur, particularly on sites like Twitter, or X, where it has just got worse and worse; it is like the wild west. Ofcom have said that they will have a gold standard of age verification with lots of different options, but their take on this—and looking at the Online Safety Act—is encouraging websites to do the right thing. Is that going to be enough, or are we going to have to see some enforcement before we see action?

Baroness Bertin: I am not going to sit here and necessarily defend Ofcom, although in fairness it is tougher than that. By the end of July, there will be an absolute legal obligation on all sites showing pornographic material to prove—I think that is the legal obligation—that they have proper age-verification processes in place.

What I would add, though, is that that is the tip of the iceberg. Are those girls—and it always is girls—over 18? Some do not look over 18, and we will perhaps come to that in a minute because that is another big problem. Have they given their consent? Can they withdraw their consent? I have recommended a whole host of safety measures that absolutely must be put in place. A plc has a whole load of legal obligations it has to put in its annual review and that should be the case for pornography platforms—for any platforms, including social media, that host any sort of pornography. The standards are just completely unacceptable.

Likewise, around advertising on these sites, I have had a letter exchange with the Advertising Standards Authority. I am delighted that Nicky



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Morgan has taken over as chair because she obviously understands this area and was very influential in putting the violence against women and girls guidelines into the Online Safety Act. However, I do not believe that the ASA is remotely involved in the advertising that goes on pornography platforms. I am not encouraging you to go on these platforms, but you will see this is a very problematic area, and that is where they are making their money. We touched on this in the review, but if I could urge the Committee to look at anything, I would definitely urge a far greater interrogation of the advertising ecosystem of pornography platforms. I hope they will respond to regulation, but they will respond more quickly to revenue streams.

Chair: That would probably be all our gut instinct.

Q168 **Catherine Fookes:** Baroness Bertin, I came to your briefing in one of the Committee Rooms when you launched your report.

Baroness Bertin: Yes, I remember it was very hot.

Catherine Fookes: It was very hot, but it was incredibly useful. Thank you for all the work you have done on this.

Following on from Rebecca and Sarah's questions about children, how do we ensure that all porn companies prove that they are age-verifying young girls who are taking part in pornography? Otherwise, they may be unwittingly uploading child sex abuse material, which is illegal. How do we make that change in the law?

Baroness Bertin: CSAM is obviously illegal. If they were wittingly putting that kind of content up, they would immediately be in breach of the law. But you make a very good point. At the moment, going back to my point about standards, even with some of the better players—I am not going to name them, but there are levels of good players and bad players—we just have to take their word for it. You cannot carry on having a situation where an industry as prolific as this industry is not scrutinised properly. Ofcom is going to scrutinise on age verification, but it is not necessarily going to scrutinise proactively.

A suggestion—to be honest, this is probably one of the biggest recommendations, on which I would welcome any help you can give me in encouraging the Government and breaking through the bureaucratic inertia that one can often find—is that an organisation like the BBFC should work with Ofcom to really proactively scrutinise for standards. Is that something that they would classify offline? No, it is not. I am not suggesting that every single piece of content has to be checked by the BBFC—the world has changed—but you could take big audits, big tranches, big spot checks of content on mainstream sites, and then, with the BBFC, for example, working in the confines of the Online Safety Act and with Ofcom, I would have thought you could quite quickly see a good dialogue with some of these organisations to raise the standards to a place that would be in the right place for offline content.



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Likewise, with regards to whether a person is over 18, is there a paper trail? Do we actually know whether that person has consented? There needs to be far more proactive interrogation and scrutiny of the industry to that effect. That is why I am calling for far more statutory things that they must display that they have done, in addition to age verification.

Q169 Catherine Fookes: To what extent is the design and operation of pornography platforms inherently harmful?

Baroness Bertin: Let us differentiate between platforms. Paid-for sites are one thing. Obviously, with paid-for sites you have an incredibly valuable tool in the payment providers. A lot more work has to be done with payment providers around sites not meeting certain standards. The standards that I am recommending should be put into law to bring that parity, which we can talk about in a bit more detail later. In the recommender model—the free-to-view sites that use advertising to make their money—there is no transparency. We do not know. We have no idea what their algorithms are. That is the problem. There needs to be more transparency on that. We should understand how they set their algorithms.

The model is that they are taking as many data points as they possibly can and then offering up your porn journey, if you like. Obviously, in shopping, that is okay, although it can cost you a lot of money, but in pornography, what is happening is that they are trying to keep you on there for as long as possible. They are showing you more and more stuff and potentially, as we know, more and more extreme stuff. Combine that with the fact that we know how the neurons in the brain work—you start off wanting one cigarette and then you actually want 20—and, if we are honest, it is not dissimilar to substance abuse. You can get addicted quite quickly. There are quite a few studies and pieces of evidence about that that were put into the review. I think they call it blunting, where you want more and more extreme content. I am certainly led to believe by people who know a great deal about this that those are the models they would be using. This is why greater transparency and greater guidelines and restrictions around how those models can operate need to be put in place.

Q170 Catherine Fookes: Is there evidence of people becoming addicted to the content?

Baroness Bertin: Yes, there most certainly is. The World Health Organisation stepped back from talking about pornography as an addictive pastime. The industry put an awful lot of time and effort into trying to get that result. To be perfectly honest, that should be interrogated again. Problematic pornographic use is certainly a thing. If you speak to experts, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many people who have these kinds of addictions, and it can be hugely damaging to relationships, life and a whole host of things.

Q171 Christine Jardine: Much of what you have said reflects what we heard



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last year from a French delegation at the United Nations that has done a lot of work on pornography and the addictive element to it. Curiously, it also thought that we had effectively tackled the problem with the Online Safety Act. Do you think that we are missing something that perhaps the French have picked up on in the research, and that we need to look again at how we address that?

Baroness Bertin: Specifically on addiction?

Christine Jardine: Yes.

Baroness Bertin: To be perfectly honest, I do. If you were able to be more categorical that it definitely does have addictive qualities, if that is the right word, you would open up a sort of stream into the NHS and be able to have more pathways to help, particularly for young men. As with all these things, the reason we are in this situation and having these sessions is that it has been a big taboo. No one really wants to talk about it, not least the Government and regulators, hence why we are here. The same probably goes for the NHS. It would not necessarily be running towards opening up that stream of work, but, in the context of men and young boys' mental health, we know that they struggle. You will be aware that the suicide statistics are huge for men and boys. I know the National Crime Agency has been working a lot with sextortion gangs. That is a slightly different thing, but it is all part of boys being sucked into this harmful community and activity, which we have not given enough time and proper, thorough thought to. That would be one of those things as well. This is perhaps a side session in your manosphere inquiry, but men and boys must not be forgotten in all these conversations about tackling violence against women and girls. They are part of the conversation; their role in our society has to be properly thought through and not just dismissed as a side issue.

Q172 **Chair:** On addiction to pornography, is there also a desensitisation and a worry that there have to be more and more extreme elements—not just necessarily an addiction to the porn itself, but a thirst for looking for something more and more extreme? If we look at the fact that 47% of girls now expect to be slapped or strangled during sex, is there a concern that this pattern will just continue?

Baroness Bertin: Yes, completely, 100%. That is why I am determined that we have to put the brakes on it and properly get the guardrails and the offline standards into the online world, because that is exactly what is happening and what will continue to happen. We have talked quite a bit about violence against women and girls and the statistics speak for themselves: 20% of recorded crime is VAWG. The other really important thing to note is that, in the context of it being a gateway into really harmful behaviour against children, there is a lot of evidence that the search for more extreme content then takes them into a place that is 100% illegal and harmful, and harmful to children. That needs to be acknowledged. I think I am right in saying that last year was the worst year for recorded online child sexual abuse crimes. Around 850 men a



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month are arrested for those sorts of crimes. It is very high and very worrying. The experts in this field will categorically say that they have no doubt whatsoever that there is a link, with online viewing of extreme pornography heading them in that direction.

Q173 **Rachel Taylor:** Could you give some examples of what constitutes legal but harmful pornography?

Baroness Bertin: Obviously, illegal pornography is fairly specific—and, by the way, a big recommendation is that more content needs to go into that illegal bucket. In a sense, as it stands, “legal but harmful” is everything that is not illegal pornography in the context of online viewing. I think it would be helpful to read out the BBFC guidelines. In addition to what is illegal extreme pornography—bestiality, necrophilia and rape—they would not classify material that includes “dialogue likely to encourage an interest in sexually abusive activity, which may include adults role-playing as non-adults”. That is very important because that is something I 100% recommend should go into illegal pornography. To be completely clear, this is on mainstream sites, not the dark web. It is easy; you put it into a search, and you can get it. Essentially, to the untrained eye, it is child sexual abuse material. It is little girls in bedroom scenes. I will not read out the titles, but, basically, fathers coming home and having sex with their daughters. Because it is not their daughter—it is a depiction—they can get away with it.

Q174 **Rachel Taylor:** Do you have other examples of what constitutes legal but still harmful pornography?

Baroness Bertin: Currently, strangulation porn is legal, because you are—well, depictions of it; let us be clear. There was a big fight with the MOJ over this. They would say it was already illegal. Well yes, if you are actually strangling someone, that is illegal, but they are not actually strangling someone; they are depicting that. That is what has to change. Currently, that is in the legal but harmful bucket. Then, obviously, the degrading, very abusive, what looks like lack of consent but is a sort of play-out, is in that legal but harmful category. To be clear, the BBFC would not classify that in offline sex videos.

It is quite complicated, but to try to make it a bit easier in my own mind as well, there are three things that have to go into the illegal bucket. The first is strangulation, and depictions of strangulation and suffocation. Tick—the Government have said they will do that. We have to make sure the amendments are correct and done properly. The next area that is currently in the legal but harmful bracket is depictions of incest. There is a huge amount of incest porn currently on mainstream sites. That is very troubling. In the less harmful category, it is sort of, “Auntie takes nephew’s virginity, ha-ha”. It is basically making a joke out of child abuse. The very problematic stuff is obviously the little girl having a relationship with her father. That should be in that category. Likewise, as I have said, the role-playing of anything that could potentially purport to



be child sexual abuse or could encourage child sexual abuse—again, the BBFC would not allow that in offline content.

I do not think it should be complicated, but one has to be realistic and we would have to come up with some different proposals, which are all in this review. I purposefully gave the Government some freedom and some options on how they wanted to proceed on that other bucket of content, which the BBFC describes as “sexual threats, humiliation or abuse which do not form part of a clearly consenting role-playing game” and “the infliction of pain or acts that are likely to cause serious harm”. Those are the other things that are currently legal online because they are not captured by the Video Recordings Act, which allows the BBFC to regulate.

The options are as follows. You could create a safer pornography code, which could quite easily be slipped into the Online Safety Act. That is one of my key recommendations and would be quite a quick solution because you are working with a piece of primary legislation that already exists. Alternatively, you could reopen either the Communications Act or the Video Recordings Act to amend them in respect of the BBFC and say, “This also applies online.” The final option is to create a publication offence for some of this content. It would have to be quite specific and, obviously, there is an element of judgment or nuance. What would a reasonable person think was misogynistic? What would a reasonable person think was abusive? That is why it is very important to involve an organisation like the BBFC in that process, because it is the expert. Sometimes with these delicate areas where you do not want to restrict sexual freedom—and I get that—there needs to be a degree of judgment.

Q175 Rachel Taylor: What are the reasons behind online pornography currently not being highly regulated?

Baroness Bertin: The reasons are very simple. Essentially, the Government and regulators do not run towards anything that could be perceived as getting involved in the public’s sex life. That is just a fact. In fairness, Claire Perry, a very old colleague of mine, attempted this in 2015 and we changed some things around depictions of rape in pornography. However, very little has been done on this because it has fitted into the “too difficult to sort out” box and there is a taboo around it. No one is running towards it unless there is pressure being put on the Government to change it. That is part of the reason we have left it so long.

Q176 Rachel Taylor: For the benefit of people who are engaging with this session, could you explain what your recommendations are for achieving parity between the regulation of online and offline pornography?

Baroness Bertin: Essentially, increase the bucket that constitutes illegal pornography to include depictions of strangulation, depictions of incest and depictions of anything that could encourage child sexual abuse. That is the easy bit. Well, I say “the easy bit”. I find it hard to understand how anyone could say at the Dispatch Box, “Depictions of incest in



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pornography should carry on," but as ever with all these things, there will have to be a big fight on it all. However, that would immediately be covered in the Online Safety Act. Ofcom would be able to act immediately against anything that constituted illegal pornography.

Then, as I set out earlier, for the bucket that is just a little greyer, the BBFC could use its judgment and nuances in the guidelines. That could come in the form of a safer pornography code that could be inserted into the Online Safety Act. My preference is to use the Online Safety Act. It is not the most perfect piece of legislation in the world, but it is what we have. You made the point that the EU is looking to the Online Safety Act to see how it is working. We are relatively pioneering in this regard, and we should try to make it as agile and fluid as possible. You cannot keep creating new planks of primary legislation because it just takes too long, so you have to use what is in front of you.

Q177 Natalie Fleet: Can you explain to what extent payment providers currently act as an unlawful regulator of the porn industry?

Baroness Bertin: As I said earlier, the payment providers are helpful in some regards. If the payment providers decide that something actually is falling short of the standards that they would put on content, then they will stop the payments going through. We saw that back in 2020 when Laila Mickelwait, who is an amazing woman, raised the case that there were millions and millions of child sexual abuse videos on mainstream sites, and overnight 10 million pieces of content came down because Mastercard and Visa said, "No, we are not putting these payments through." It shows you how quickly these companies can act when money is at stake, but it is a suboptimal situation that we are relying on external companies like payment providers to do the checks on this because it is just not their job. Equally, I am a liberal, low-regulation Conservative; I do not really want more regulation in business, but the porn industry is the one place where we need a lot more regulation and that should not just be left to payment providers. From my discussions with them, they would welcome much more clarity around those grey areas I was talking about. Upgrading some of those very problematic pieces of content that we see way too much, in huge swathes—they would welcome that, to be perfectly honest.

Q178 Natalie Fleet: You said it is effective because when it happens, it happens very quickly, and it is a large amount of content. Do you think it should be formalised?

Baroness Bertin: Yes, I do. Solving this issue is not just about pulling one lever: "Oh, let's change the law; let's get more regulation." That is obviously a key ingredient, but you need the ancillary services that act as enablers, support mechanisms and payment providers, and provide the whole network to the porn industry, to be very much involved. My understanding is that within the business disruption tools that Ofcom have in the Online Safety Act, they can involve those ancillary providers, and therefore they should do. For example, most companies have free-



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to-view sites, but they also have subscription sites. Payments should be stopped on those subscription sites if they are owned by an umbrella company that is also operating and offering pornography that is completely substandard on another site that they own.

There needs to be a proper look involving the BBFC, like I said, but involving a much more holistic approach whereby you have an accreditor, much more transparency and an ability for investors, payment providers and the whole world to see which sites are actually complying and meeting the regulations that I hope will be put in place. Hopefully that will act to raise standards organically as well, if that makes sense.

Q179 **Rosie Duffield:** You mentioned the Gisèle Pelicot case. One of the most shocking aspects of that was the normal men who appeared to be just turning up and putting aside their public persona—their jobs and the fact that they were neighbours—and doing this unspeakable thing. You were talking about the 850 men a month. I wonder if there is any evidence about that kind of person. Is that something that has been looked at?

Baroness Bertin: I do not know if it has been looked at specifically, but just reading around it, it is just so terrifyingly broad. I do not think there is a specific person who particularly gets involved in this kind of content. Actually, the thing that always struck me about the Pelicot case is that it was everyone and anyone. That is what was so terrifying. That is my point about the scale and the ease with which you have been able to look at this kind of content; it is just so broad.

Q180 **Rosie Duffield:** It is a bit chicken and egg, perhaps. Are they seeking that stuff, or is it there and therefore really easy to access? As a society, what do we do? Do we educate those people that are at the end of those photos and videos who are victims or potentially abused people? Perhaps if they are ordinary people doing ordinary jobs, it does not occur to them to think about that.

Baroness Bertin: In the review I talk a lot about public awareness. You obviously have to cut the content off at source, raise the standards and try to ensure that it is not going on in the first place. As determined and optimistic as I am that there will be change—one has to remain positive—you are still not going to get a 100% hit rate. I would say that I would be happy with a 60% amelioration of the situation.

On public awareness of what is illegal, let us take deepfakes and—this is another thing I would love to bring to your attention—nudification apps. They must be made illegal; there is no good that comes from them. I am sure you have made that point.

Chair: Yes, that was one of our recommendations in the report of our NCII inquiry.

Baroness Bertin: Yes, quite right. A bit to my earlier point, it is not one lever you can pull; it is a variety of levers. We all know that change in



legislation and regulation is not the be-all and end-all, but it sends that signal to society about what is right and what is wrong.

I would also point you to some very good research the BBFC did the other week showing that porn users in the main do not particularly want to see violent content and would actually welcome more restrictions. I have a faith in society. I cannot remember if it is chicken or egg, but I do not think people are necessarily going out there to look at violent content. Obviously, we are very deep into the cycle now—15 or 20 years—but I think the cycle was the other way round.

Q181 Chair: Coming back age verification, and Ofcom's new regulations from 25 July, does the easy availability of VPNs mean that people can just evade it? We had a discussion about this yesterday with a panel of people from ISPA. There are lots of different apps and technologies available to parents to limit what children see, but parents need knowledge of and education on what tools are available. Is there anything that can be done to limit ways of getting around age verification?

Baroness Bertin: On ways around age verification, it is going to be very much a watching brief. I feel strongly that there has to be an independent observation about how well this is working. We obviously need to keep a very close eye on that.

Companies that allow VPNs to access their sites are still very much in scope of the Bill, but this brings me to the point of technology for good. A lot more emphasis, political drive and resource has to go into trying to create technology that can help prevent some of the things that you have just set out. I do not think we are putting enough time and effort into that, globally or domestically. Look how fast technology is happening. AI is going at a rate we could never have predicted. For me, that is terrifying. But to go back to my sort of optimistic note, you are not telling me that they cannot also come up with some brilliant ideas that could actually make the situation better.

To your point on parents, I speak as a parent who really struggles with all this. Do not get me started on the battle over smartphones—I realise that is a different session. Parents are trying to head off so many different apps and trying to work out, "What are the safety mechanisms for that one? Have I done that one? Has another one popped up?" It is just intolerable, to be perfectly honest.

We noted what the Welsh Government have done specifically on pornography. That is a bit different, but it would be quite helpful to have one nice, easy-to-use place—it could be a gov.uk page—that is regularly updated with genuinely relevant information on the apps that kids are most likely to look at, to help parents get their child's smartphone, if they have lost that battle, safer. We are all quite time-poor, and quite often we are actually behind the curve on it all. Parents need more support on that.



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Chair: Thank you. Welcome to Emily Darlington, who is guesting from the DSIT Committee and has been very welcome throughout these sessions. She has some questions around the BBFC, and some others.

Q182 Emily Darlington: Thank you so much for having me, Chair. It is really interesting how similar these conversations are across Committees. I also had the opportunity to guest on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. We are all talking about the same thing, and so are parents, which is not surprising.

You have already mentioned that we cannot just focus on the girls; we have to focus on the boys, too. That made me think of some of the work I have done in Milton Keynes. You have young men who believe that it is natural for women, girls, their classmates, to cry during sex. They think that is pretty normal. If that is what they think is a normal sex life, you really fear for their future sex lives. There is a fantastic stat about strangulation: it is the second biggest cause of stroke in women now. This is what we are faced with.

I want to drill down on the BBFC. It is very well understood by parents and porn producers. However, porn is now not done in a movie house with cameramen and sound technicians; it is self-made, home-made, quite exploitative, and sometimes it is shared. How does that regulatory environment work in an online environment where the people producing porn are not necessarily au fait with the regulations around it?

Baroness Bertin: The responsibility has to go on the platforms that are sending it out and making money from it. If we upscale the regulation and make the law better, as I hope we do, a platform that wants to operate legally will have to make sure that those checks and balances are in place and that there are proper moderators. Therefore, like I said, an organisation like the BBFC should be involved in that.

I am interested to note that you are from the DSIT Committee. The other thing that I have found in this whole process is that, to their credit, the Government basically agree with all the recommendations, but the question is, is it DSIT, MOJ or Home Office? There is a sort of bureaucratic inertia around this, and it is like, "We'll get back to you, because we're just trying to work out which Department it should belong in." That is a slightly different point, but it is not good enough.

I feel very strongly about the sense that, "Oh, it's too difficult to regulate these companies, because there's so much content and we don't know where it's come from and we don't know who's made it," and all the rest of it. Too bad. It needs to change, and there needs to be far more responsibility and scrutiny on that platform. I do not accept that that cannot be achieved.

Emily Darlington: That is a really interesting point.

Baroness Bertin: You need to want to do it. You have to think properly about how you are going to do it, and there needs to be a real political



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drive. I hope this Government have that political drive, because if they want to meet that target, they are going to need to think about these sorts of things.

Q183 Emily Darlington: Absolutely. My second question is about deepfake porn. We talk about the gaps in the law, and potentially BBFC regulation, but deepfake porn is not actually within that categorisation. We heard last time that 95% of deepfake porn is not of celebrities, but of classmates, the woman down the road and others. Is that potentially in that legal but harmful space, and does it need to be made explicitly illegal?

Baroness Bertin: It will certainly be illegal to make deepfakes without consent, with great credit to my colleague Baroness Charlotte Owen, but increasingly we are moving towards thinking about what good can come from making a deepfake, a bit like the nudification app point.

I cannot emphasise enough what a close eye regulators, parliamentarians and the Government have to keep on emerging tech. This took society completely by surprise; it has been terrible. Some people's lives have been completely ruined. As you say, it is terrible that it happens to famous people, but it is teachers being turned into porn movies, and young classmates doing it to each other. It really was a total dereliction of duty that we allowed a piece of tech like that to carry on in the way that it has done for so many years. I think I am right in saying that the Government are acting on that.

How do we tell if something is deepfake? There is a lot of tech around that—watermarking, and certain technologies that can be placed over content that distorts it if someone tries to change it—but it is all quite nascent stuff. We need to get much better at creating the technology that could put a stop to some of this.

Equally, on intimate image abuse, whereby someone has consented to making something and then it has been shared without consent, let us say that ends up on a company's pornographic platform. The hashtagging, the proper proactive ability to pull that kind of content down, is an absolute red line for me. They must put those sorts of safeguards in place as well.

Q184 Chair: In our previous inquiry on non-consensual intimate image abuse, there was much talk about the creation of deepfakes and the creation of NCII, and about how the sharing of the material was what needed to be illegal in order to create the impetus for sites to take it down. If that is not illegal, and it is just the creation that is illegal, then it will stay up on these sites. Is that something that you have found?

Baroness Bertin: Yes. The creation and the sharing should be illegal, and there should be no question around consent. I am pretty hard-line on that.

Q185 Chair: At the beginning of our last session, we had Microsoft and Google



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in front of us. They were both very reluctant to say that NCII should be illegal, because it is not like CSAM, where there is no consent at all. There is no question of CSAM being consensual, whereas with NCII, they said that they get lots of malicious reports, but they were not able to tell us the quantity of those malicious reports compared with the ones that were actually found to be true. What are we going to do to ensure that search engines as well as platforms adhere to this?

Baroness Bertin: I am glad you asked me that. I do not think search engines are included in age verification. Sorry, I am just going back a little; I know that is a slightly different thing. Search engines are so powerful in this, and they have to be part of the conversation, because of the amount of stuff that can be found, as I said to you before, and the power of downranking certain content, as well as not allowing that content to be on there in the first place. They have somehow managed to get away with not being implicated as much as some other organisations. I am not going to name names, but they are very much involved in this conversation and this ecosystem. With all these areas, be it deepfake or more general standards of pornography, it is a live issue. Just because the Online Safety Act has said x, y and z, these things can and should be revisited to some degree.

Q186 **Kirith Entwistle:** Thank you, Gabby, for your time; sorry, I came in late. To what extent do you think pornography has evaded regulation by virtue of being a policy area split between many different Government Departments? To what extent do you think this issue can be solved by having a specific ministerial responsibility around pornography?

Baroness Bertin: When we started the review almost two years ago, I just could not believe how little attention had been given to it and how there was just no one in Government really thinking and worrying about it. Obviously, there were Departments that understood the law as it stood, but there was no one really thinking, "Well, hang on, actually," not least because this is an industry that is hugely pioneering in tech. There was no dialogue whatsoever with the Government. The meetings that I had were probably the first meetings that had been held in some Departments in a very long time. Let us not forget that until my colleagues in the Lords started raising pornography as an issue, it was not really mentioned at all in the Online Safety Act, quite incredibly. It has definitely been one of those issues where people think, "Oh, this is too difficult and a bit too embarrassing, so let's just pretend it's not happening." Perhaps we also do not want to reveal that we know too much about the issue simply because we are British and all that.

That has been hugely problematic. Then you come to the point, which I mentioned to Emily, that there is, I am afraid, a problem with who takes proper ownership of this. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has a bit of a conflict of interest in all this, to be perfectly honest, because it is obviously trying to push for growth in tech, especially with AI, but is not necessarily going to be thinking about how all the safety checks will be put in by looking for tech that is going to be



safe—safety by design—and avoid harms. The Home Office is much more hardwired to worry about that.

In the context of harmful pornography, there should be a Minister who has it within their portfolio, and on balance it should probably sit within the Home Office but feed into all the other Departments that it has relevance to, such as the Department for Education, and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, because that is where the Online Safety Act sits. Ultimately, there needs to be a convening Minister and Department. If I were on the outside, I would be more worried by it being in the Home Office than necessarily the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Q187 Kirith Entwistle: The Committee has recommended previously the creation of an online safety commission that could try to bring together this work and really drive forward online safety as a broader issue. Is that something that you see some value in?

Baroness Bertin: Yes. Obviously, if you were starting from scratch, you would not have an organisation like Ofcom that is looking after the Post Office as well as looking after our online space. It would not be right at the moment to tear that up completely, but I would have thought that in the future you would want to get rid of some of those legacy things and really have an organisation that was properly focused on online harms. It is important to mention that it would be there not just to get involved in harmful pornography, but potentially to look at other harmful content. Those issues are not siloed, so an organisation that really understands that is important. I certainly back that progression.

Q188 Emily Darlington: During our inquiry on the SIT Committee about online misinformation, we heard from both Ofcom and the Minister for online safety, who sits in DSIT, but very clearly the BBFC sits in DCMS. Do you think that a cross-Government role is needed, and potentially somebody at a more senior level rather than a quite junior ministerial level?

Baroness Bertin: You could argue that the Cabinet Office and No. 10 should be very involved in this. There are a lot of potential political legacy issues, and potential failures in this area are hinged on some of these issues, so if I were Keir Starmer I would want to keep a very close eye on it. Yes, there is an argument for that, and I 100% back cross-Government working on these issues. It is never easy, and we have talked about that a lot over the years with Governments of all stripes. It should not be that difficult, and I hope the violence against women and girls strategy reflects more a cross-Government approach, as that would be helpful.

Q189 Christine Jardine: We have touched on this in a couple of questions, but your report talks a lot about education, the reticence to talk about pornography in schools and the way teachers are worried about it. The survey found that 23% of respondents learned nothing about pornography at school, but at the same time it was their main source of



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information. I wonder to what extent you think the damaging effects of pornography are being compounded or enabled by the taboo about discussing it, particularly with children and young adults.

Baroness Bertin: It is obviously a difficult one because you do not want to highlight pornography to children who are too young. You have to judge the right age for that and talk about pornography in the context of harm. Sometimes people bandy around “porn literacy”. Look, I do not think any school should be chatting to kids about how great porn is. I do not mean to sound flippant with that, but there is a huge patchiness on this. The guidelines need to be much clearer, and teachers need to be given so much more support.

Obviously some schools will do it well and others will find it very difficult. Perhaps you are the geography teacher who is having to do it off the side of your desk. This is such a growing problem in our society that it is not a nice-to-have. I know schools have an awful lot to do, but unfortunately it is a key plank of education that we need to get right. One of the recommendations is that there absolutely needs to be much better support for teachers who are taking on this role, and the guidelines need to be much clearer and much more specific on how they tackle this issue.

The other thing I recommended, which bleeds a little into your inquiry, is that we should really make sure that there is a space and more support for boy-only education in this space. There is a brilliant organisation called Beyond Equality that would say that you can have a much more honest, frank, open conversation about these issues, which is potentially much more helpful and is not happening enough at the moment. I always bring it back to the fact that some schools are good and some schools are not so good. Some of the external organisations that can be brought in may have content that is not right, or it may be brilliant; we just do not really know. It needs to be looked at more closely.

Q190 Christine Jardine: To what extent are children—boys especially—being educated about the harms associated with easy access to porn? If education about harmful pornography was more effective, could it be an effective preventive measure against violence against women and girls?

Baroness Bertin: Yes. We have to remember that the things that you are talking about in the manosphere are proactive recruiters of their ideology and views, and therefore people who want to put across the different view have to be proactive as well, and not passive participants. That is why it is very important to talk about it in schools in the context of what harm it can bring. I read of a ridiculous example the other day where a school was teaching boys how to safely strangle their girlfriends. What level of madness is that? My point is that there needs to be some standards for external advisers.

Chair: Some of the advice on how to use online safely is delivered by the people we are finding problematic at the moment, if the schools are stepping back.



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Q191 **Catherine Fookes:** Baroness Bertin, you mentioned earlier something that the Welsh Government are doing well. I am a Welsh MP, and I would love to know what that is.

Baroness Bertin: I will have to get back to you with the specifics, because I am never going to find it in here. The Welsh Government have a very good gov.wales page that brings together all the resources that are out there for parents to talk safely to their child at an age-appropriate level about pornography, its risks and potential harms. We felt that was a good example, and the English Government should do the same.

Q192 **Catherine Fookes:** Returning to points that my colleagues have raised about regulation and who is going to step up and do the work, we have the Internet Watch Foundation for child sexual abuse material. Do you see a role for an organisation like that to try to look out for, get rid of and hash pornographic material?

Baroness Bertin: Yes, I do. I should also point out that the Government are in a fortunate position whereby the BBFC is essentially saying as an organisation that it is really up for taking on the role of scrutinising the industry. You would have to speak to them—I do not want to put words in their mouth—but it perhaps would be based on a model not dissimilar to the IWF, which has worked effectively and done a great job on reducing child sexual abuse material. I would foresee a similar model.

I think the BBFC are very open to working with Government. They have already been in to see the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and even No. 10, I think, about how they could uplift and work with Ofcom, within the confines of the Online Safety Act, so it is all legally watertight, to perhaps become a part-regulator of standards within pornography. That is something that we should absolutely pursue and try to get over the line. Law change is all very well, but if you do not have the scrutiny of whether the law is actually being enforced properly, it is potentially all a bit of a waste of time, so that is very important.

By the way, I do not think it has to be expensive, because you could have a polluter-pays type model, whereby companies are asked to contribute. That is very normal practice; for example, telecoms companies contribute to Ofcom. Much more mainstream models should be looked at for this industry.

Q193 **Catherine Fookes:** Are there any other countries that are doing it well? I seem to remember you mentioned that Australia has a commission.

Baroness Bertin: Australia has been well ahead of the curve on strangulation. Different countries have certain bits in their pockets that they are doing well. Canada, Australia and another country—I will have to get back to you on that—have done better in enshrining content that could encourage child sexual abuse in the illegal category. That is obviously where we need to follow suit to stamp out age-play-type content, which is totally abhorrent.



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Australia has an online harms commissioner, I believe, which is something that we should look at closely. Globally, we need to talk together a lot more. I will double-check, but I am pretty certain that the issue of violence against women and girls is not in the workstreams for the Macron visit, which is a shame. Why not? This is one area where we could all agree and move together globally, which would make quite a big difference. Obviously not all countries would agree, but a lot of western democracies are worrying about this. The global union is something that we need to work more on.

Q194 **Chair:** Thank you, Baroness Bertin. This has been incredibly interesting, insightful and horrifying all at the same time.

Baroness Bertin: Yes, I am sorry. It is my stock-in-trade now.

Chair: Yes, we are kind of used to it in our Committee. Are there any other topics or areas of your review that you have not been able to cover that you think it would be useful for the Committee to know about or do further work on?

Baroness Bertin: I am just going to quickly look at my own recommendations.

Chair: If there are but they do not come to mind right now, please feel free to write to us. We can take written evidence as well.

Baroness Bertin: One thing that I have not talked about, and that is powerful because it fits in a little with the sort of pressure that needs to be put on the advertisers in this context, is the investors: the money men who are putting money into these kinds of organisations. There needs to be an ecosystem in which there is much more transparency around who owns what, who is meeting the guidelines and who is falling way short of what we think are appropriate standards.

If there were more transparency around that, I would hope that the investor community would start to feel the pressure as well. The companies and the platforms themselves—the social media platforms and the pornography platforms—need to feel the heat from scrutiny, regulation and law change, but all the ancillary support services need to have pressure put on them as well, because they are the facilitators.

Thank you very much for having me. I am determined to keep going on this, so thank you for your help.

Chair: Thank you, on behalf of the Committee, for all the work that you have done and for your expertise and testimony today.