

September 12, 2023

Hon Michelle Rowland MP

Minister for Communications

PO Box 6022

House of Representatives,

Parliament House

Canberra, ACT 2600

Australia

Dear Hon Rowland,

We write to you today as a united front of international survivors and experts from 15 countries deeply concerned about the welfare and safety of children in Australia. It is with an urgent sense of responsibility that we implore you to reconsider your current stance on age verification and instead swiftly roll out a trial and pilot program to protect children. Australian children are presently exposed to grave harm and vulnerability without adequate protection from exposure to violent, racist, and incest-themed pornography, and we cannot afford to delay action any longer.

International Consensus Is Embracing Age Verification—Australia Is Falling Behind

The technology and best-practices are well-established for verifying age to prevent childhood exposure to pornography. For example, the Age Verification Providers Association is a “global trade body for independent providers of privacy-protecting, standards-based, age assurance technology” which promotes best-practices for privacy and socially responsible practices in the industry.ⁱ

The commonsense measure to apply this existing, effective, and secure mechanism to online pornography is being embraced around the world. Germany, France, and several states within the United States of America have passed or are pursuing age verification requirements in order to protect children.

A 2021 survey from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) recommended “implementing age verification technologies with a view to limiting the access of children to pornographic websites as well as the uploading of exploitative material featuring children.”ⁱⁱ The OSCE—which works over 57 participating States in North America, Europe and Asia—affirmed this recommendation in a 2022 policy paper.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the European Union, the euCONSENT program successfully proved age verification systems could operate while preserving user privacy/anonymity “through three pilots by over 2,000 children, adults and parents from 5 European States.”^{iv}

A wealth of public opinion surveys conducted in democratic countries across the globe underpins our collective belief that the majority of adults stand firmly behind the implementation of age verification protocols. For instance, a comprehensive study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2019 revealed that an overwhelming 83% of parents endorsed the necessity of robust age verification controls.^v

Similarly, as you know, a more recent study from 2021, carried out in Australia, illuminated that a substantial **78% of Australian adults lent their support to the cause of age verification**, recognizing its pivotal role in preventing childhood exposure to explicit material.^{vi}

Age Verification is Urgent — Australian Children Cannot Wait Years for Protection from Known Harms

The Australian government is knowingly allowing harm to befall children if it fails to swiftly pursue age verification trials and pilots.

It is well established that pornography has been linked to a variety of mental, social, and sexual harms to adolescents.

Several studies have shown pornography consumption to be associated with both verbal and physical sexual aggression and actual and anticipated sexual violence among adolescents, including during dating.^{vii} One of countless examples, is the case of a teenage boy repeatedly raping his niece who was under 11 years old in order to act out pornography he viewed. In this case the judge said the impact of the boy's exposure to pornography was clear. The judge said: "This is an alarm call to society in general as to the dangers of a child accessing pornography."^{viii}

It has also been linked to more sexist attitudes^{ix} and gender-stereotypical sexual beliefs.^x Pornography consumption can lead to the sexualization and objectification of children and adolescents, girls in particular, and all of its associated psychological and emotional harms. Also to the development of sexual dysfunctions such as erectile dysfunction, difficulty orgasming, low libido for partnered sex, and more.^{xi}

With respect to mental health, adolescent pornography consumption is associated with poor self-image, increased insecurity,^{xii} lower life satisfaction, psychosomatic symptoms, depressive symptoms,^{xiii} suicidal ideation, suicide attempts,^{xiv} and more. Internet pornography may also negatively impact academic performance. For example, research has shown that the more adolescent boys viewed pornography, the poorer their grades were after six months.^{xv}

Pornography does not depict safe sex practices and research has found that adolescent pornography consumption is associated with having unprotected sex, among other risky sexual behaviours.^{xvi}

Bear in mind that this is only a very small sampling of the vast research demonstrating pornography's harms to children.

Further, **age verification is particularly important to protect vulnerable children such as those without the privilege of involved, tech-savvy, caretakers.** Due to the vast and serious harm of pornography to adolescent development, it is vital for responsibility to shift to larger entities, especially in the private sector, to prevent childhood pornography exposure instead of relying on overburdened caretakers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are calling on the Australian Minister of Communications to urgently reconsider the government's current stance on age verification measures.

The global community is embracing age verification, the technology and industry is robust and takes online privacy into account.

There is imminent danger facing Australian children who lack sufficient protection from exposure to pornography, including increased risks of mental health problems, sexual development, and even child-on-child sexual abuse, including rape and other harmful sexual behaviors.

We implore the minister to expedite the rollout of a trial and pilot program to safeguard the nation's youth.

Respectfully,

Wendy	Lowe	Defend Dignity	Canada
Brenna	Wallace	A Lady with Lilies Society	Canada
Penny	Rankin	National Council of Women of Canada	Canada
Brandi	Lucas	Salvation Army	Canada
Destiny	Roy		Canada
Renee	L		Canada
Habib	Majid	Burnt oasis	Ghana
Ndonwie	Peter	Pan African Organisation for Research and Protection of Violence on Women and Children	Ghana
Rachel	Moran	International Centre on Sexual Exploitation	Ireland
Hazel	Larkin		Ireland
Alice	Wainaina	Kenya Christian Professionals Forum	Kenya
Tobias	Nauruki	Empowered Youth Coalition-EYC	Kenya
Timothy	Njoroge		Kenya
Foday	M.Kawah	Defence for Children International-Liberia	Liberia
Thomas	Brown	Disabled Children and Female Empowerment Network	Liberia
Robin	Mata		Mexico
Tulasha	Khadka	ChildSafe Net	Nepal
Sarah	Scott Webb	SIM For Freedom	New Zealand
Chill	Ekwurumadu		Nigeria
Adora	Mann		Portugal
Sylvie	Chaussve		Réunion
Mameh	Kargbo	World Hope International (WHI)	Sierra Leone
Kate	Farina	Be in Touch	South Africa
Resh	Mehta	International Labour Organization	South Africa
Claude	Cunningham		South Africa
Emma	van der Walt	Brave to Love	South Africa
Desiree	Hoppenstein		South Africa
Marx-Lenin	Nagan		South Africa

Iza	Gauche		South Africa
Colin	Masurik		South Africa
Elsje	Schoombee		South Africa
Dhano	Letchman		South Africa
Gemma	Kelly	CEASE UK	United Kingdom
Darryl	Mead	The Reward Foundation	United Kingdom
Erin	Walker	Project STAND	United States
Sharon	Slater	Family Watch International	United States
Russ	Tuttle	The Stop Trafficking	United States
Elizabeth	Omale	Benue State University	United States
Haley	McNamara	National Center on Sexual Exploitation	United States
KP	LoveJoy	Porn Free Colorado	United States
Jill	Langhus		United States
Katharine	Bennett		United States
Maxwell	Matewere		United States

ⁱ See: <https://avpassociation.com/>

ⁱⁱ Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (CTHB) “Survey Report of Efforts to Implement OSCE Commitments and Recommended Actions to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings” OSCE, 2021 https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/1/522934_1.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (CTHB) “Policy responses to technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings: Analysis of current approaches and considerations for moving forward” OSCE, 54, February 2022 <https://www.osce.org/cthb/511786>

^{iv} See: <https://euconsent.eu/>

^v *New research commissioned by the BBFC into the impact of pornography on children demonstrates significant support for age-verification*, British Board of Film Classification (United Kingdom: 2019), <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>.

^{vi} Australian eSafety Commissioner, *Public perceptions of age verification for limiting access to pornography*, 2021. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/public-perceptions-age-verification-for-limiting-access-pornography> (accessed January 22, 2022).

^{vii} Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, and Ashley Kraus, “A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies,” *Journal of Communication* 66, (2016): 183-205, doi:10.1111/jcom.12201; Jochen Peter and Patti M. Valkenburg, “Adolescents and Pornography: A Review of 20 Years of Research,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 4-5 (2016): 1-23, doi:10.1080/00224499.2016.1143441.

^{viii} Liam Heylin, “Judge calls for action on access to porn as she sentences Cork teen for rape of niece.” *Echo Live*, October 2021 <https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/arid-40718415.html>

^{ix} Chelly Maes et al., “#(Me)Too Much? The Role of Sexualizing Online Media in Adolescents’ Resistance Towards the MeToo-Movement and Acceptance of Rape Myths,” *Journal of Adolescence* 77, (2019): 59-69, doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.10.005.

^x Peter and Valkenburg, *ibid*.

^{xi} Tim Jacobs, et al., “Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men: Multivariate Analysis Based on an International Web-Based Survey,” *JMIR Publications* 7, no. 10 (2021): doi:10.2196/32542; Brian Park, et al., “Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports,” *Behav Sci* 6, no. 3 (2016): 17, doi:10.3390/bs6030017.

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- ^{xiii} Magdalena Mattebo et al., "Pornography Consumption and Psychosomatic and Depressive Symptoms Among Swedish Adolescents: A Longitudinal Study," *Upsala Journal of Medical Sciences* 123, no. 4 (2018): 237-246, doi:10.1080/03009734.2018.1534907; Cecilia M. S. Ma, "Relationships between Exposure to Online Pornography, Psychological Well-being and Sexual Permissiveness among Hong Kong Chinese Adolescents: a Three-Wave Longitudinal Study," *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 14, (2019): 423-439, doi:10.1007/s11482-018-9604-5
- ^{xiv} Christina Camilleri, Justin T. Perry, and Stephen Sammut, "Compulsive Internet Pornography Use and Mental Health: A Cross-Sectional Study in a Sample of University Students in the United States," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, (2021): 613244, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.613244.
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- ^{xvi} Meghan Donevan and Magdalena Mattebo, "The Relationship Between Frequent Pornography Consumption, Behaviours, and Sexual Preoccupancy Among Male Adolescents in Sweden," *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare* 12, (2017): 82-87, doi:10.1016/j.srhc.2017.03.002; Wen-Hsu Lin, Chia-Hua Liu, and Chin-Chun Yi, "Exposure to Sexually Explicit Media in Early Adolescence is Related to Risky Sexual Behavior in Emerging Adulthood," *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 4 (2020): e0230242, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0230242.