

# Age Verification on Pornography Websites: Justifications, enforcement and prevention

New research from the Centre for Gender Equal Media shows **overwhelming public support** for strengthening measures to prevent children from accessing online pornography.

Action to prevent children from accessing online pornography is urgently needed. GEM recommends changes to current Government proposals.

**86%**  
of people support a legal requirement on companies to prevent children's access to commercial pornography websites

## Government Proposals

[The Digital Economy Bill](#) includes Government proposals to restrict children's access to online pornography by age-verification on commercial porn websites.

The Bill allows for two means of enforcement:  
(a) websites that refuse to comply can be issued with a financial penalty; and/or  
(b) a regulator may give notice of the fact of non-compliance to any payment-services provider or ancillary service provider.

## Overwhelming public support for legislative action

A recent GEM commissioned poll by ICM<sup>1</sup> found that over **86% of people support a legal requirement on companies to prevent children's access to pornography websites.**<sup>2</sup>

## Adverse impact on young people's understandings of sexual consent

Recently, the Women and Equalities Select Committee's report into [sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#) found "extensive evidence that children's perceptions of sex, consent, gender roles and relationships are changing as a result of the pornography they are seeing."<sup>4</sup>

Research conducted by two GEM co-founders and colleagues in 2013 found that young women and some young men think that pornography shapes sexist attitudes, influencing their understandings of sexual consent and the acceptability of sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> In a survey of 1002 16-21 year olds commissioned by the BBC in 2014, young people reported that online pornography 'makes people think girls are sex objects'.<sup>6</sup>

## Young people accessing pornography

Although many pornography websites stipulate that those accessing them should be 18 or over, [a 2014 ATVOD study](#) found that during just one month approximately 200,000 children aged between 6 and 15 accessed adult websites. Almost a quarter were of primary school age.

## Education is essential

Age-verification is only part of the solution. Whilst we need legislative action to prevent to tackle the harms of pornography a comprehensive approach is required.

This means ensuring that young people, as part of the core curriculum, receive age-appropriate sex and relationships education. Funding for specialist sexual violence services to support those affected by pornography is also crucial.

'Introducing effective age-restrictions for online pornography will send a powerful symbolic message across all of society, as well as encouraging longer term attitudinal and behavioural changes'

Professor Clare McGlynn, GEM Co-founder

## Effective Enforcement: Blocking websites that break the law

Despite the evidence of harm, the current Government proposals lack effective enforcement mechanisms. Without an option for websites that break the law to be blocked, and the possibility of criminal sanctions for non-compliance, the current proposals will be ineffective.

The public have shown mass support for the introduction of stronger measures to ensure harmful material is not readily accessible to children.

Our poll, conducted by ICM, found that just under 80% of people support the government taking action to ensure websites that do not comply with new legislation are blocked.<sup>7</sup>

ISP blocking is not new.

It has been used for non-compliant gambling websites, websites that infringe trademarks, and websites who profit from persistent copyright infringements.

78%

of people support government taking action to ensure non-compliant websites are blocked

In order for this important legislation on commercial pornography websites to have the effect the government intends, the current proposals must be strengthened to enable the possibility of ISP blocking.

- GEM welcomes the Government's proposals to introduce age-verification measures for commercial pornography websites.
- But more effective enforcement mechanisms, such as blocking non-compliant websites, are essential.
- Limiting access to pornography is only part of the solution. Action on pornography must include education for young people on gender equality and sexual consent.

1. 2,048 adults were polled by ICM in July 2016. The data is weighted to the nationally representative profile of adults in Great Britain, by gender, age and region.

2. In response to statement: 'Pornography websites and social media companies should be legally required to prevent children accessing online pornography', 86% of respondents agreed, with higher overall support from women (90%) than men (82%).

3. See, for example Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M., & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013). "Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape": How young people in England understand sexual consent. Office of the Children's Commissioner; also Nash, V. (2015) *Identifying the Routes by which Children View Pornography Online: Implications for Future Policy-makers Seeking to Limit Viewing* Report of Expert Panel for DCMS.

4. Women and Equalities Committee (2016) *Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools*, Third Report

5. of Session 2016-17, House of Commons, p. 46 See Coy *et al* (2013)

6. Survey designed by Dr Miranda Horvath, Middlesex University and Dr Maddy Coy, London Metropolitan University, administered by ICM in 2014 for the BBC documentary *Porn: What's the Harm?*

7. *ATVOD (2014) For Adults Only? Underage Access to Online Porn* Windsor: ATVOD

8. In responses to statement: 'Websites that allow children to access pornography should be blocked by government', 78% of respondents agreed, again with higher support from women (85%) than men (70%).