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# Pornography Is Filmed Prostitution: Trauma, Violence, PTSD & Dissociation in Swedish Pornography Production

Melissa Farley[a], Erica Bergkvist[b], Merly Asbogard[c], Johanna Pethrus[d], Mikaela Lannergren[e], and M. Alexis Kennedy[f]

[a]Prostitution Research & Education United States, San Francisco, CA, USA; [b]Department of Social Work, UMEA Universitet Sweden, Umea, Sweden; [c]Nemo Immortalis Est Sweden, Stockholm, Sweden; [d]Private Practice Sweden, Umea, Sweden; [e]SBU, SBU Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment Sweden, Umea, Sweden; [f]Department of Criminal Justice, University of Nevada Las Vegas, USA

**ABSTRACT**

We interviewed 101 women and men in Sweden who experienced both prostitution and pornography production. While survivors of prostitution have long stated that there is little or no difference in their experience of either of these arms of the sex trade, there has been scant research that systematically investigates pornography production from the perspective of the person who is filmed. We hypothesized that the violence and consequent symptoms of emotional distress resulting from pornography production were equal to or greater than the violence and emotional distress resulting from prostitution. In this pilot study we obtained quantitative and anecdotal data which indicated that interviewees suffered the same or similar antecedent traumatic abuse and neglect, racist and sexist verbal abuse, manipulation, and coercive control, with rape and other violence from pornography sex buyers and pimps. The production and dissemination of their pornography videos caused many of our interviewees extreme distress. We found an 84% incidence of moderate to very severe PTSD symptoms. Sixty percent of the time interviewees met screening criteria for a dissociative disorder. Interviewees reported that the only difference between their experiences in prostitution and pornography was the presence of a camera and the adverse impact of widespread distribution of their images. These findings strongly suggest the need to recognize pornography production as a source of serious harms. We conclude that it is reasonable to conceptually and legally reconnect pornography and prostitution.

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Pornography; webcam; prostitution; PTSD; dissociation; pimp; trafficker; sexual assault

## Introduction

For decades, survivors of pornography production have explained that the only difference between pornography and prostitution is the camera in the room (A. Dworkin, 1992; Giobbe, 1993; Simonton & Smith, 2004). In today's sex markets, sex buyers may shoot cell-phone videos with or without

**CONTACT** Melissa Farley mfarley@prostitutionresearch.com Prostitution Research & Education United States, San Francisco, CA 94116-0254, USA

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permission in the same locations where prostitution happens. A survivor described the sameness of prostitution and pornography, explaining that she had been physically hurt, raped, and coerced to do unwanted sex acts on film in exactly the same ways that pimps and sex buyers had coerced and harmed her in prostitution (Simonton & Smith, 2004).

A significant number of women in prostitution have also been involved in pornography production, but little research has investigated their experiences. Despite a major literature on the social impacts of pornography use (Attwood, 2005; Doan et al., 2025; Duffy et al., 2016; Filimon, 2026; Grubbs et al., 2018; Huntington et al., 2021; Kohut et al., 2021; Linz et al., 2019; Malamuth et al., 1991, 1996; Privara & Bob, 2023; Puerto, 2020; Scarcelli & Stella, 2020; Upasani & Jain, 2025), there is a significant gap in research conducted from the point of view of the person who is paid-for and filmed in prostitution. Our study is grounded in, and stems from, survivors' descriptions of what pornography is and its similarity to prostitution. Our research also stems from both empirical and theoretical studies on pornography that suggest the harms of pornography come from its production (Tyler, 2015), its connection to prostitution (Bailov et al., 2015), and mental health sequelae (Grudzen et al., 2011). The Swedish law on prostitution has recently enacted a section that defines a sex buyer as a person who pays to watch sex acts by webcam in real time (Waltman, 2023).

Several studies suggest that many prostituting women have had pornography made of them. Half (53%) of prostituted women at a survivor-led exit agency had their prostitution filmed by sex buyers or pimps in an era before the widespread use of cell phone cameras (Giobbe, 1990). There was an overlap between pornography production and prostitution in another study of women who were filmed in pornography: 27% of women and men pornography actors had prostituted in escort and 24% in strip-club prostitution in the 3 months prior to the research (Javanbakht et al., 2017).

Nine women who were involved in Swedish pornography production described their mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, low self-image, loneliness, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts (Donevan, 2019). Women who were filmed in pornography while they also prostituted had significantly worse mental health and more severe depression than women who were not in prostitution; 50% of the women filmed in prostitution were living in poverty and 34% had experienced domestic violence (Grudzen et al., 2011). A 9-country study of 854 people in prostitution found high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTews4SD; Farley et al., 2004). Follow-up analysis for this large sample found that people whose sex buyers or pimps made pornography of their prostitution had significantly more severe PTSD symptoms than those who did not have pornography made of them (Farley, 2007).

Webcam prostitution is the performance of a sex act(s) in real time via video camera (often a cell phone camera) on the Internet in exchange for fees or tips.

Women and men who prostitute online via webcams face risks including violations of their privacy, potentially harmful encounters with clients, and no legal protections (Drolet, 2020). In 2020, 1.5 TB of women's prerecorded videos and images were stolen and leaked from the UK pornography site OnlyFans (Shedahi & Partington, 2020). A webcam prostitution survivor explained that "camming was worse than the rest of the porn industry because we had direct contact with the consumer, people who were often very cruel and demanding by threatening to leave negative reviews and therefore affecting your pay if you didn't perform exactly as they wished" (Shehadi and Partington, 2020)).

Until 2023, purchasing sex, pimping, and trafficking were illegal in Sweden, but if these criminal acts were filmed then they are not illegal.[1] A 2021 Swedish case is illustrative: a woman reported to police that she had been pimped into prostitution, and that she had been raped many times in prostitution. She had gone with her pimp to the home of a sex buyer. The sex buyer paid the pimp for the session with the victim. The pimp filmed the session, explaining to both the sex buyer and the victim, "*if you film, you are not buying a whore you are producing a movie*" (Police Authority, 2022, p. 130). The pimp was arrested but appealed the court's decision. The rape and pimping charges against him were dropped in 2022. The pimp and his attorney convinced the Swedish court that he was not a pimp but a pornographer (Svea Court of Appeal, 2022). The implication of this legal decision is clear: if a pimp wants to avoid being charged with the crimes of rape and trafficking under Sweden's current laws, all he has to do is to film his crimes. At that point the crimes will be named pornography and declared to be protected speech.

Like the Swedish Court, courts in the United States have often ruled that if a rape of a prostituted woman is filmed then it is speech and not rape. For example, "The World's Biggest Gang Bang" video shows 251 sex buyers raping Grace Quek (called Annabel Chong in the film). After ten hours, the production team had to stop because she suffered internal bleeding. The film was edited to four hours, and the men's life-threatening sexual assaults against her had become pornography (Farley, 2006).

Pimps benefit when they can artificially segregate an arm of the sex trade, such as pornography, legalize it, and then mainstream it. Sex trade advocates and their attorneys de-link pornography and prostitution because that compartmentalization provides legal protections, thereby increasing profits. Words are used to camouflage the harms of the sex trade: pornography is named content creation or speech instead of a filmed record of prostitution, after which the de-linked sex business is legally mainstreamed. "Freedom of speech" attorneys promote the idea that a film of prostitution is speech rather

[1]Purchasing sex is also illegal in Norway, Iceland, Northern Ireland, France, Canada, Republic of Ireland, and Israel.

than a documentation of abuse; they insist that pornography is separate from the same acts of prostitution that are not filmed.

While many people still believe that pornography is separate from prostitution, the current research will investigate this question empirically by interviewing survivors of pornography production. Our research aimed to investigate the differences or similarities of the experiences of pornography production and prostitution from the perspective of those in it. We hypothesized that the violence and consequent symptoms of emotional distress resulting from pornography production were equal to or greater than the violence and emotional distress resulting from prostitution.

## Method

### *Procedure*

Sweden's Ethical Review Authority in Stockholm reviewed our research proposal (case number dnr 2021–01201le) and approved it under Swedish law.

In this research, pornography was defined as cellphone photos, studio-produced films, livestreamed webcam, and computer videos of sex acts that were produced for the purpose of generating income. Prostitution was defined as the sale of a sex act in exchange for cash, food, drugs, shelter, or any other goods needed or valued by the prostituted individual.

"There is quite simply no such thing as a representative sample of women selling sex" (McKeganey & Barnard, 1996). We nonetheless sought a diverse sample of women and men who were currently or previously in pornography or prostitution. Information about the study was posted on Instagram accounts of nonprofit agencies such as Inte din Hora (prostitution survivors' organization), Rosa Sidan (sexworkers' organization), and Talita (faith-based agency assisting women escaping prostitution). Cards were left in healthcare and social service agencies' waiting rooms. Advocates who accompanied police to areas of Stockholm known for street prostitution were asked to hand out information about the research. To increase the ethnic and cultural diversity, participants were recruited in Gothenburg and Malmö as well as Stockholm.

Prospective participants were screened for age and relevant history. In-person interviews lasted approximately 3 hours; interviewees received a 1000 SEK honorarium. Interviewees were read an informed consent, and questions about the research were answered. Interviewees were anonymous and were encouraged to sign with any name other than their real name. None of the research interviews were audio- or video-recorded, one element of anonymity. Participants were permitted to skip answering any item. When fewer than all 101 participants answered the question, the varying number of responses per item is reported in Results.

Interviewees' copy of the consent form included the name and phone number of a licensed counselor in the event of emotional distress following the interview (Campbell et al., 2009), along with a list of agencies offering assistance in mental health emergencies.

Researching sexual violence can be stressful (Poole et al., 2004; Zurbriggen, 2002). Interviewers learned how to administer the questionnaires and also discussed secondary PTSD, which is common among sexual violence researchers. A facilitated interviewer support group was provided during data collection.

### Measures

*Childhood Trauma Questionnaire* (CTQ) is a 28-item test that assesses the severity of childhood abuse and neglect using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never true") to 5 ("Very often true"). The 5 subscales measure childhood emotional abuse, emotional neglect, physical abuse, physical neglect, and sexual abuse, with scores ranging from 5 to 25 (D. P. Bernstein et al., 1994; Hagborg et al., 2022). The Swedish translation of the CTQ had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, indicating its validity (Gerdner & Allgulander, 2009), and adequate internal consistency (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2024).

*Pornography, Sex Work and Prostitution Questionnaire* (SPQ) (Farley et al., 2004, 2016). The questionnaire contains 228 structured and semi-structured questions including sex, gender identity, ethnic identity, antecedents to sex trade entry including adoption and foster care, verbal abuse, sexual assault, threats of violence, suicide attempts, non-suicidal self-injury, a range of physical and mental health problems, and whether the interviewee has been subjected to coercion, deception, threats, or violence in prostitution and pornography production. For example, we asked, "Has anyone photographed or filmed you in porn, sex work, or prostitution without your consent? If yes, please explain" and also "While you were doing porn were you hurt with racist words that insulted you because of the color of your skin? If yes, please explain." "While you were doing porn were you hurt with words that insulted you because of the country you came from or because of your religion or cultural heritage? If yes, please explain." The SPQ has been used in 10 countries, with culturally specific items added in each location.

PTSD is defined in DSM-5 as A) having experienced a traumatic event such as sexual violence, B) persistent reexperiencing of the trauma such as nightmares, flashbacks, physical and emotional distress to trauma reminders, C) avoidance of trauma-related thoughts, feelings, or reminders, D) negative thoughts and cognition such as memory loss, persistent negative beliefs about people, and inability to experience positive emotions, and E) hyperarousal symptoms such as irritability, sleep disturbance, and hypervigilance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Dissociative disorders are defined in DSM-5 as a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Dissociation is a psychological escape strategy that allows people to handle overwhelming and inescapable pain and terror. A primary function of dissociation is to deal with the encounter with systematized human cruelty that is experienced during childhood sexual abuse and by prostitution by splitting those traumatic events off from the rest of the self. Dissociation makes it possible to endure the physical and psychological pain of traumatic events.

We note that the DES and PCL-5 are screening tools and are not the equivalent of a clinical interview and diagnosis.

*Dissociative Experiences Scale* (DES) (E. M. Bernstein & Putnam, 1986; Carlson & Putnam, 1993) is a 28-item questionnaire that assesses the frequency and severity of dissociative symptoms, including amnesia, depersonalization/derealization, and absorption. Interviewees rate the frequency of specific dissociative experiences ranging from 0% (never) to 100% (always). Scores of 30 or higher suggest clinically significant dissociative symptoms such as those in dissociative identity disorder. Cronbach's alpha of DES ranges from .89 to .95 (Arzoumanian et al., 2023; Carlson & Putnam, 1993). A Swedish version of the DES also had adequate internal consistency, reliability, and validity (Körlin et al., 2007).

*PTSD Checklist* (PCL-5) is a widely used research tool which assesses the frequency and severity of symptoms of PTSD (Weathers et al., 1993) using DSM-5 PTSD diagnostic criteria (Martínez-Levy et al., 2021). Symptom severity is measured by a 0–4 Likert scale. Severity scores range from 0 to 80 on the scale's 20 items. PTSD symptom severity scores can be obtained for Intrusion (B cluster), Avoidance (C cluster), Negative Alterations in Cognition and Mood (D Cluster), and Arousal and Reactivity (E Cluster). Provisional PTSD diagnosis can be made by scoring items rated as 2 (moderate) or higher as an endorsed symptom, using the DMS-5 diagnostic criteria: 1 B item, 1 C item, 2 D items, and 2 E items. A score greater than 31–34 is suggestive of PTSD (Pettrich et al., 2025). Alpha coefficients for the PCL-5 range from .81 to .97 (Forkus et al., 2023; Wilkins et al., 2011). The Swedish translation showed acceptable validity and reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.56 to 0.77 (Sveen et al., 2016).

Interviewees were encouraged throughout our interviews to comment, add to, or otherwise explain their responses. Interviewers were trained to communicate the perspective that researchers were there to learn from interviewees; therefore, we valued all that they had to say. Qualitative data were informally summarized from interviewers' notes. Quotations are illustrative, selected to show how experiences that were quantitatively measured were described in

participants' own words. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### *Analyses*

Consistent with the aims of the study, analyses were primarily descriptive and responses are reported as frequencies and percentages, with a varying number of responses to each item. Pearson correlations were calculated to examine associations between dissociation and self-harm using SPSS software.

## Results

### *Demographics*

While the research team aimed to locate interviewees who had experienced either prostitution or pornography production, nearly all (96%, 101/105) of the interviewees had been involved in both. During the phone screen, some prospective participants stated that they had not been in one or the other of these two arms of the sex trade. Later, during the in-person interviews, they revealed that they had not, for example, considered live webcam to be pornography or had not understood that going on a paid-for sexual "date" with a pornography consumer was prostitution.

For this reason, we excluded 4 of the 105 interviewees (3 women and 1 man) who had not been involved in pornography production. Our final sample included the 101 interviewees (92 women and 9 men) who had been involved in both pornography production and prostitution.

The average age of our interviewees was 29.2 ($SD = 9.25$), with a range of 18 to 58 years. When asked about sexual preference, 46.5% were heterosexual, 32% were bisexual, 4% were homosexual, and 16.8% described their sexual orientation as "other."

Half (49.5%) of our interviewees self-identified as Swedish; the remaining half had multi-ethnic backgrounds or were from other countries, including Colombia, Finland, India, Iraq, Kenya, Morocco, Peru, Poland, Serbia, and more than a dozen additional countries. Some identified multiethnic roots spanning Africa, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

### *Antecedents to pornography and prostitution*

#### *Age of entry into the sex trade*

The average age of entry into the sex trade was 18.6 years ($SD = 6.7$; median 17), ranging from 7 to 41 years.

### Childhood physical and sexual abuse

Our interviewees reported high rates of childhood trauma. Three-quarters (78%) experienced physical abuse before age 18, and 86% reported sexual abuse in childhood. Interviewees' CTQ scores reflected pervasive maltreatment at moderate to severe levels: 66.3% suffered emotional abuse; 43.6% physical abuse; 78.2% sexual abuse; 40.6% emotional neglect; and 58.4% physical neglect. Three-quarters (76/99) reported a head injury. One fifth (20%) of our interviewees had relatives who were also in the sex trade, most often a sister or mother.

As children, 46.5% had been photographed naked and sexualized, with 30% of that group younger than age 15.

A third (32.7%) of the 101 participants had experienced out-of-home placements in group homes, orphanages, or foster care, averaging 3 placements, and 45.5% (15/33) had been abused while in foster care.

### Locations where prostitution and pornography occurred

Interviewees reported multiple locations where prostitution occurred and pornography was produced. Most described prostitution on the Internet (98%); 76% described webcam or live video chat as sites of their prostitution. Prostitution also occurred in private homes (79%); in hotels, nightclubs, or private parties (75%); and through escort, outcall, or cellphone arrangements (69%). Additional locations included phone sex lines (66%), sugar daddy prostitution (59%); strip clubs (25%), bars (24%), street (18%), and farms (12%). Many participants named their prostitution "transactional sex" (60.6%, 60/99) or "survival sex" (49.5%).

During what they assumed were prostitution sessions, 63% (63/100) of our interviewees had been filmed without their consent. One interviewee described: "When I was filmed, I was not aware of it. It's still hard for me to trust others after being filmed like that in secret. It's a disgusting feeling. You feel pissed off about being raped but knowing that someone filmed it makes the whole thing even more difficult, it hurts so damn much."

Most interviewees produced pornography from their homes (83.3%, 80/96), most often using cell phones (82.3%, 79/96).

### Violence in Swedish prostitution and pornography production

*Verbal abuse.* Racist verbal abuse was reported by 17% (17/100) of interviewees during pornography production, targeting their Black skin color, Eastern European, Latina, Thai, or Muslim appearance. These experiences were often so painful that interviewees could not speak the words out loud. An equal proportion (17%,17/100) were verbally abused based on immigrant status, culture, or religion. One interviewee described, " ... he had this whole narrative about how [African] women were supposed to behave in bed and when I did not act according to his cultural stereotype he started insulting me."

Sex buyers combined sexist and racist verbal abuse during cam sessions: "The internet is full of free porn, why would I want to pay a pale pikey whore." [Pikey is a derogatory term that refers to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveler people. Today the term is also used to insult working class people who are viewed as coarse and untrustworthy.] Others reported: "He told me Latin Americans are such whores." "He said it's nice to fuck a blatte [Swedish derogatory slang for Muslim immigrants or people with dark skin]. He asked me to speak Arabic and then hit me in the face."

Sexist verbal abuse was experienced by most interviewees (86%, 86/100), including being called "whore," "cocksucker," "comedumpster," "slut," "bitch," along with rape threats. One interviewee was called "a dirty, disgusting whore . . . not worth anything."

***Physical violence.*** More than half (58%, 58/100) had been physically assaulted, and 44.6% were threatened with guns, knives, or other weapons. Most (84.2%) had been raped. The frequency and perpetrators of their rapes are presented in Table 1.

### *Pimping, trafficking, and organized crime in the business of pornography*

Forty-three percent (30/70) of our interviewees had traffickers or pimps involved in their pornography production, and 35.6% (31/87) had an "account manager" functioning as a pimp. An interviewee explained that her pornography was usually uploaded by "club owners or pimps who own more girls." Interviewees described pimp networks that moved women between locations while filming their prostitution. Forty percent (38/95) had been offered payment or other benefits for recruiting others for a pornography producer.

An interviewee described agreeing to meet one man for prostitution, only to find he had invited ten others: "They gangbanged me and they filmed quite a lot when they had sex with me without me agreeing to it."

**Table 1.** Rape in prostitution and pornography.

| Rape frequency[a] | Rate | *n* reporting |
|---|---|---|
| Raped once or twice | 15.4% | 12 |
| Raped 3–9 times | 38.5% | 30 |
| Raped 10 or more times | 46.2% | 36 |
| **Rapist identified by interviewee as**:[b] | Rate | *n* reporting |
| Sex buyer | 67.9% | 57 |
| Boyfriend (not a pimp) | 54.8% | 46 |
| Pimp | 25% | 21 |
| Pornography follower | 22.6% | 19 |
| Pornography producer | 16.7% | 14 |
| Pornography actor | 16.7% | 14 |
| Pornography director | 11.9% | 10 |

Note: [a]Among the 85 reporting being raped, 78 also reported its frequency.
[b]Some rape victims had multiple perpetrators, so they sum to more than 100%.

Three-quarters (75%,75/100) had been distressed by someone who used pornography to coerce them. In production studios, 72.5% (72/98) were coerced into performance of unwanted sex acts through threats of reduced pay, verbal abuse, forced intoxication, or physical threats.

A quarter (23/97) reported international gang involvement in their prostitution. These members of organized crime acted as sex buyers, pimps, club owners, and pornography producers. Fear of gang retribution and threats of violence were reported. One woman described a gang-involved producer who "makes money on drugs, weapons and prostitution. I have never seen him do anything but he has others under him, he has great influence over his running boys."

### *Threats of violence and violence in pornography production*

More than half (54.7%, 52/95) of these interviewees had been beaten during pornography production, with beatings scripted in advance 34% (18/53) of the time. A majority (61.9%, 60/97) were raped during pornography production, with 22% (8/37) raped once or twice, 32% (12/37) raped 3–9 times, and 46% (17/37) raped 10 or more times. One interviewee gave in to anal sex that she did not want because "It feels better to think that I´m in on it rather that the fact that they force me." More than a quarter (27.7%, 23/83) were prevented from using a condom during pornography production. Threats and harassment, including doxing, were common. See Table 2.

Interviewees endorsed four types of self-injury at high rates: sex as a form of intentional self-harm, prostitution as self-harm, suicide attempts, and non-suicidal self-harm such as cutting or burning. See Table 3.

### *Dissociation*

More than half (60%, 60/100) of our interviewees reported high levels of dissociation on the DES, with a mean score of 38.4 ($SD = 22.1$). Dissociation was significantly correlated with both past suicide attempts ($r = .25$, $p = .01$) and self-harm via prostitution ($r = .24$, $p = .02$).

One interviewee dissociated during pornography production: "It feels a bit like I'm watching a film and it's someone else they're talking to

**Table 2.** Threats and harassment during pornography production.

| Type of Threat or Harassment | Rate | *n* reporting |
|---|---|---|
| via text | 53% | 53[a] |
| via social media | 55.5% | 56[b] |
| via stalking | 39.2% | 38[c] |
| via doxing[h] | 35.7% | 35[d] |
| via doxing & harassment | 56.1% | 23[e] |
| via safety fears because of doxing | 57.8% | 26[f] |
| via threats against friends or family | 24.2% | 24[g] |

Note: The number of participants who answered each question varied and are as follows: [a]100, [b]101, [c]97, [d]98, [e]41, [f] 45, [g]99.
[h]doxing is the public release of personal information.

**Table 3.** Self-harm.

| Type of Self-harm | Rate | *n* reporting |
|---|---|---|
| Sex as intentional self-harm | 72% | 72 |
| Prostitution as intentional self-harm | 64% | 64 |
| Suicide attempt | 66% | 66 |
| Non-suicidal self-injury | 66% | 66 |

Note: 100 participants answered each question.
Half (50/100) of our research participants had made both a suicide attempt and also endorsed prostitution as self-harm.

and they're having sex with." Pimps and sex buyers, like incest perpetrators, exploit dissociation. A survivor explained: "It was easy for me to turn a trick because I could just take myself out – like with my dad. It was like I took myself out of the situation and just focused on something else and it was like I wasn't even there." Other examples: "I may have been abused or raped but I forget things . . . I forget certain events and that's probably because they're not good events. But I could never forget a graduation."; and "Sometimes I get on the metro and I stay on it until 7 stops past my stop. The conductor comes up to me at the end of the line and has to touch my arm to tell me to get off. I am not asleep, just not there."

### *PTSD*

Eighty-one percent (81/100) of interviewees met diagnostic criteria for all four symptom clusters for a diagnosis of PTSD: 93% (93) reported intrusive symptoms; 83% reported avoidance symptoms; 93% reported negative mood or thoughts; and 91% reported autonomic hyperarousal. Eighty-four percent (84, mean = 47.31. *SD* = 17.4) reported moderate to very severe symptoms of PTSD.

Interviewees' frequently reported symptoms of PTSD included recurring memories, nightmares, sleeplessness, emotional numbness, anger, or hypervigilance. Interviewees described these experiences: "I don't sleep well at all . . . soon as I close my eyes I have difficult dreams."; "I can't sleep, my brain is always awake, there are too many thoughts about what happened, so many thoughts in my head, even though I'm tired in my body . . . when I lie down on the bed I can't."; "I can't feel happy because I'm not worthy of feeling happy. I do not feel love anymore."; "I am always bitter and grumpy, even my friends pay attention to it. I don't understand those who say that you should be positive - - the world is a scary and dangerous place."; "I feel ashamed and afraid of peoples' judgment. I feel like an alien, that I do not belong anywhere."; and "I'm not trying to put the blame on myself, because it was not my fault. But people I tell about my situation to often ask why I didn't do anything to change my situation – and then comes the feeling of guilt. I don't trust anyone."

### *The added harm of pornography*

All of our 101 interviewees had been involved in both pornography production and prostitution. The two were similar to the point of overlap in antecedent risk factors, recruitment, racism, sexism, harms by pimps and sex buyers, coercion, and economic exploitation. This overlap extended to locations: private homes were the site of 80% of our interviewees' prostitution and 82% of the cell-phone-produced pornography. The primary distinction our respondents drew between prostitution and pornography was privacy and exposure: "Pornography can haunt you for years. Films can be made public and destroy everything – relationships and jobs." "After porn, you will never have a future because there is evidence out there of who you were. You will always have to face your past." "When it comes to porn you have more control, at least in the moment. Yet, when you are done filming you lose the control. You never know who's going to see it. In prostitution it is more private, porn is forever." "Porn is more traumatic because you don't know how this video will trend, it lives on in your mind." "Porn is for the world, sex work is total privacy. Nobody has to know what you are doing. I only want to be in this [sex work] for a short time, so the world doesn't have to know about this."

One woman described both similarities and differences between pornography and prostitution: "Porn is forever, but the objectification [in pornography and in prostitution] is the same. The degradation is the same. There is nothing good about it. When it comes to porn, a lot of people think that there will be a studio. It could just as well be a filmed abuse. The viewer will never know. The viewer could never know if there is a consent. And, even if there were a consent, the consequences are still there."

A number of our interviewees saw little difference between pornography followers and other sex buyers. "I would not call them followers," one woman said, "they are johns and a john is someone who, for example, buys cam." "Johns will be johns. I don't see a difference between people who just want to buy online or who want to meet, really." "There is no difference between those who buy sex and those who buy pictures/videos. I think those who buy sex also consume porn in some form" and "People who buy photos and videos always want to meet live."

## Discussion

This pilot research provides new information about the experiences of survivors of pornography production and prostitution, their traumatic experiences at the hands of pornography sex buyers and pimps, and their subsequent severe emotional distress. Our research indicates that today, prostitution and pornography production are virtually indistinguishable.

We were unable to obtain the two groups we sought at the beginning of this research since we could not find survivors of prostitution who had not been involved in pornography production or survivors of pornography production who had not been prostituted. Prior to the webcam and cell phone era of OnlyFans and PornHub, studio production of pornography was the norm. In that time period, it would likely have been possible to obtain a sample where there was a separation in research participants' experiences of pornography and prostitution.

The most frequently reported age of entry to the sex trade was 15, consistent with the literature documenting that, globally, adolescence is when prostitution or pornography production is initiated (Cronley et al., 2016; Nugroho et al., 2025).

We heard from 101 sex trade survivors that their experiences of violence, verbal abuse (both racist and sexist), and pimp control were similar, if not indistinguishable, during both pornography production and unfilmed prostitution.[2] The consequences of these combined traumatic events included

[2]For documentation of harms caused by prostitution, see Baldwin, M.A. (1999). A Million Dollars and an Apology: Prostitution and Public Benefits claims. Hastings Women's Law Journal 10:189–224; Baldwin, M.A. (1993). Strategies of connection: Prostitution and feminist politics. *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 1: 65–79; Barry, K. (1979). Female Sexual Slavery. New York: New York University Press; Barry, K. (1995). The Prostitution of Sexuality. New York: New York University Press, Bishop, R & Robinson, L S (1998) *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle*. Routledge; Boyer, D., Chapman, L., & Marshall, B.K. (1993). Survival Sex in King County: Helping Women Out. Report Submitted to King County Women's Advisory Board. Seattle: Northwest Resource Associates; Brody, S., Potterat, J. J., Muth, S. Q., Woodhouse, D. E. (2005) Psychiatric and characterological factors relevant to excess mortality in a long-term cohort of prostitute women. *Journal of Sexual and Marital Ther*apy 31(2):97–112; Church S., Henderson M., Barnard M., Hart, G. (2001) Violence by clients toward female prostitutes in different work settings: questionnaire survey. *British Medical J*ournal 322:524–525; Cler-Cunningham, L. & Christenson, C. (2001) Studying Violence to Stop It: Canadian Research on Violence Against Women in Vancouver's Street Level Sex Trade, *Research for Sex Work* 4: 25–26; D'Cunha, J. (2002) Legalizing Prostitution: In search of alternatives from a gender and rights perspective. Seminar on the Effects of Legalization of Prostitution Activities. Stockholm, Sweden, Nov 5–6 2002. p 28–46. www.naring.regeringen.se; Dalla, R. L., Xia, Y., & Kennedy, H. (2003). "You just give them what they want and pray they don't kill you": Street-level sex workers' reports of victimization, personal resources and coping strategies. *Violence Against Women* 9: 1367–1394; Dempsey, M. M. (2017) What Counts as Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation? How Legal Methods Can Improve Empirical Research, *Journal of Human Trafficking* 3:1, 61–80; Dworkin, A. (1997). Prostitution and Male Supremacy. In *Life and Death*. New York: Free Press; El-Bassel, N., Witte S., Wada, T., Gilbert, L., Wallace, J. (2001) Correlates of partner violence among female street-based sex workers: substance abuse, history of childhood abuse, and HIV risks. *Aids Patient Care STDS* 15(1):41–51; Farley, M., Baral, I., Kiremire, M., & Sezgin, U. (1998). Prostitution in Five Countries: Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Feminism & Psychology* 8: 415–426; Farley, M, Lynne, J & Cotton, A. (2005) Prostitution in Vancouver: Violence and the Colonization of First Nations Women. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 42: 242–271; Farley, M., Cotton, A, Lynne, J, Zumbeck, S, Spiwak, F. Reyes, ME., Alvarez, D., Sezgin, U. (2004). Prostitution in Nine Countries: Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In M Farley (ed) *Prostitution, Trafficking & Traumatic Stress*. Routledge; Farley, M. (2017) Risks of Prostitution: When the Person is the Product. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*: 3 (1), 97–108; Farley, M. & Kelly, V. (2000) Prostitution: A Critical Review of the Medical and Social Sciences *Women & Criminal Justice* 11 (4): 29–64; Farley, M. and Seo, S. (2006) Prostitution and Trafficking in Asia. *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 8(2): 9–12; Gibbs, E, Van Brunschot, S, Rosalind A., & Krull, C. (2000) Images of Prostitution: The Prostitute and Print Media, *Women & Criminal Justice*, 10(4): 47–72; Giobbe, E. (1991). Prostitution, Buying the Right to Rape, in Burgess, A.W. (ed.) *Rape and Sexual Assault III: a Research Handbook*. Garland Press; Giobbe, E. (1992). Juvenile Prostitution: Profile of Recruitment in Burgess, A.W. (ed.) *Child Trauma: Issues & Research*. Garland Publishing; Giobbe, E. (1993). An Analysis of Individual, Institutional & Cultural Pimping. *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law 1*, 33–57; Herman, J. L. (2004). Introduction: Hidden in plain sight: Clinical observations on prostitution. *Journal of Trauma Practice*, *2*(3–4), 1–13. Hoigard, C. & Finstad, L. (1986). Backstreets: Prostitution, Money and Love. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press; Hughes, D.M. (2000). The "Natasha" Trade: The Transnational Shadow Market of Trafficking in Women. Journal of International Affairs 53: 625–65; Hunter, S. K. (1994). Prostitution is Cruelty and Abuse to Women and Children. *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 1–14; Hynes, H. P. & Raymond,

high levels of PTSD and dissociation. This research validates witness reports and analyses from survivors of pornography production that the infinite nature of internet pornography makes it an even more traumatic experience than unfilmed prostitution (Farley & Donevan, 2021; Giobbe, 1993; MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997; Tyler, 2015; Waltman, 2021). The profound harms caused by the traumatic stress of combined prostitution and pornography production, described by interviewees as "inseparable," offer a new perspective on the sex trade. These results suggest a linkage between today's pornography and prostitution which has not been described in other research.

In both filmed and offline prostitution, pimps and sex buyers exert psychological and physical control (Schwartz et al., 2007). Greater economic and psychological vulnerability reduces a woman's power to refuse any demand. Pornography sex buyers sometimes become obsessed with women, doxing and stalking them, with threats escalating to: "You should be stoned. You should be raped" (Donevan, 2019, p. 46). A survey of 36 treatment-seeking

J. G. (2002) Put in Harm's Way: The Neglected Health Consequences of Sex Trafficking in the United States. In J. Silliman and A. Bhattacharjee (eds.) Policing the National Body: Sex, Race, and Criminalization. South End Press. p 197–229; Jakobsson, N., & Kotsadam, A. (2013). The law and economics of international sex slavery: Prostitution law and trafficking for sexual exploitation. *European Journal of Law and Economics*, 35, 87–107. Jeffreys, S. (1997). *The Idea of Prostitution*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press; Karim, Q.A., Karim, S.S., Soldan, K., & Zondi, M. (1995). Reducing the Risk of HIV Infection among South African Sex Workers: Socioeconomic and Gender Barriers. American Journal of Public Health 85: 1521–1525; Leidholdt, D. (1993). Prostitution: a violation of women's human rights. Cardozo Women's Law Journal 1: 133–147; MacKinnon, C. A. (1993). Prostitution and Civil Rights. Michigan Journal of Gender and Law 1: 13–31; MacKinnon, C. A. (2001) Sex Equality. New York: Foundation Press; MacKinnon, C. A. and Dworkin, A. (1997). *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; McKeganey, N. & Barnard, M. (1996). *Sex Work on the Streets: Prostitutes and Their Clients* Milton Keynes Open University Press; Miller, J. (1995). Gender and Power on the Streets: Street Prostitution in the Era of Crack Cocaine. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23: 427–452; Oram, S., Stöckl, H., Busza, J., Howard, L. M., Zimmerman, C. (2012, May 29) Prevalence and Risk of Violence and the Physical, Mental, and Sexual Health Problems Associated with Human Trafficking: Systematic Review. *PLoS Medicine*; Pedersen, P.V., Arnfred, A., Algren, M.H., and Juel, K. (2016) Comparison of health behaviors among women brothel workers to those of the general population of women in Denmark. *Women & Health* 56 (4), 376–394; Potterat John J., Brewer Devon D., Muth Stephen Q., Rothenberg, Richard B., Woodhouse Donald E., Muth, John B. et al. (2004) Mortality in a long-term open cohort of prostitute women. *American Journal of Epidemiology*159:778–85; Quinet Kenna. (2011) Prostitutes as victims of serial homicide: trends and case characteristics, 1970–2009. *Homicide Studies* 15(1):74–100; Raphael, J. (2004) *Listening to Olivia: Violence, Poverty, and Prostitution*. Northeastern University Press; Raymond, J., D'Cunha, J., Dzuhayatin, S.R. `, Hynes, H.P., Ramirez Rodriguez, Z., and Santos, A. (2002). *A Comparative Study of Women Trafficked in the Migration Process: Patterns, Profiles and Health Consequences of Sexual Exploitation in Five Countries* (Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Venezuela and the United States). Coalition Against Trafficking in Women; Raymond, J., Hughes, D. & Gomez, C. (2001). *Sex Trafficking of Women in the United States: Links Between International and Domestic Sex Industries*. Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. Rothman, Emily F. (2017) Second Thoughts: Should US Physicians Support the Decriminalization of Commercial Sex? *AMA Journal of Ethics* 19 (1): 110–121. Silbert, M.H. & Pines, A. M. (1981). Sexual Child Abuse as an Antecedent to Prostitution. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 5: 407–41Silbert, M.H. & Pines, A. M. (1982). Victimization of Street Prostitutes. *Victimology* 7: 122–133; Silbert, M.H., Pines, A.M., & Lynch, T. (1982). *Sexual Assault of Prostitutes*. National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, National Institute of Mental Health, Delancey Street Foundation; Silbert, Mimi H. & Pines, Ayala M. (1983). Early Sexual Exploitation as an Influence in Prostitution. *Social Work* 28: 285–289; Tyler, Kimberly A., Hoyt, Dan R., & Whitbeck, Les B. (2000) The Effects of Early Sexual Abuse on Later Sexual Victimization Among Female Homeless and Runaway Adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 15 (3): 235–250. Valera, R., Sawyer, RG, Schiraldi, G.R. (2001). Perceived Health Needs of Inner-City Street Prostitutes. *Am J Health Behavior*. 25(1): 50–59; Vanwesenbeeck I. (1994). *Prostitutes' Well-Being and Risk*. Amsterdam: VU University Press; Vanwesenbeeck, Ine. (2005). Burnout among female indoor sex workers. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34: 627–639; Ward, Helen, & Day Sophie (2006) What happens to women who sell sex? Report of a unique occupational cohort. *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 82(5):413–7; Weisberg, D. K. (1985*). Children of the Night: A Study of Adolescent Prostitution*. Lexington Books; Zimmerman, Cathy, Hossain, Mazeda, Yun, Kate, Roche, Brenda, Morison, Linda, Watts, Charlotte (2006) *Stolen smiles: a summary report on the physical and psychological health consequences of women and adolescents trafficked in Europe*. London.

pornography survivors found that 75% had been cyberbullied via threats and doxing, with negative effects on relationships, employment, child custody, physical health, and social participation (El Khoury et al., 2024). The racism in the sex trade which was described by our interviewees has been previously documented; for example, Black women were targets of significantly more aggression in pornography than White women (Butler, 2015; Carter & Giobbe, 1999; Cowan & Campbell, 1994; Deer, 2010; Fritz et al., 2021; Marttila, 2008).

A particularly harmful aspect of pornography production is its function as a permanent record of the humiliating sex acts performed in prostitution. Most women in prostitution do not want pornography made of their prostitution because the images circulate indefinitely. Many interviewees preferred non-filmed prostitution for this reason, yet a majority had been filmed without their consent. Pornography was commonly viewed by many of these interviewees as a permanent document of traumatic abuse, humiliation, or torture (Farley & Donevan, 2021; Farley & Kennedy, 2024).

Our interviewees had an extremely high rate of PTSD (81%) which was comparable to treatment-seeking pornography survivors (83%, El Khoury et al., 2024) and torture survivors (88%, Abu Suhaiban et al., 2019), while greater than Syrian war refugees in Sweden (30%, Tinghög et al., 2017).[3] All elements of PTSD (intrusive thoughts, avoidance, negative mood/thoughts, and autonomic hyperarousal) were at a severe level.

A majority (60%) met screening criteria for a dissociative disorder (Carlson & Putnam, 1993), consistent with findings among Korean women in prostitution (Choi et al., 2009) and treatment-seeking pornography survivors, 78% of whom showed high levels of dissociation (El Khoury et al., 2024). Anecdotal reports have described traumatic details of the events precipitating dissociation. One woman who was filmed at a kink.com production, dissociated during a 5-hour session during which she was filmed being vaginally tortured and electrocuted. Afterward, she saw other women also bleeding from similar productions (personal communication, June 12, 2017).

Herrington and McEachern (2018) described pimps' and pornographers' strategic induction of dissociation as "breaking the spirit" or creating psychologically, biologically, socially, and economically controlled, seemingly compliant women (Herman, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2007). Dissociative symptoms were strongly associated with both suicidal behavior and non-suicidal self-injury (Cipriano et al., 2017), consistent with broader findings that prostitution is a self-injurious behavior (Mellin et al., 2025; Nester et al., 2023).

These findings have implications for clinicians. Recognizing the harm is foremost among the authors' concerns. At this time the primary clinical

[3]The lowered incidence of PTSD among Syrian war refugees may be a result of a number of factors; for example, noncombatant civilians in war who can escape war zones may be less traumatized than prostitution or torture survivors. There could also be an element of symptom denial in Syrian refugees as a result of racism and fear of employment or housing discrimination.

challenge is to name pornography production and unfilmed prostitution as experiences that are often profoundly harmful. We hope that treatment recommendations will come after clinicians are better able to recognize, name, and fully understand the traumatic experiences of women, men, and children who have been involved in the production of pornography and other arms of the sex trade. Two-thirds of our interviewees viewed prostitution not simply as a "job" but as a means of self-harm. As Judith Herman wrote about prostitution,

> For helping professionals, it is difficult enough to face the reality of sexual and domestic violence as it operates in a single family, and to engage in a therapeutic relationship with a battered woman or abused child. How much more difficult, then, to face the reality of sexual violence as exercised by an organized criminal enterprise that operates freely in every community, hidden in plain sight, and to engage with victims who have been systematically reduced to the condition of slavery. Even those of us who are seasoned clinicians may find ourselves overcome with feelings of disgust, fascination, or pervasive dread, reactions which interfere with the formation of a successful therapeutic alliance. Like bystanders everywhere, we may choose not to see, hear, or speak about what in fact we already know. (2004, p. 2)

Women who have experienced prostitution and pornography often seek help years after assault, though early treatment improves recovery (E. R. Dworkin et al., 2023). While PTSD is beginning to be understood as a common sequela of prostitution, dissociation is frequently misidentified despite being a core trauma survival response (Schauer & Elbert, 2010; Tschoeke et al., 2019). Dissociation is a survival strategy in pornography production and prostitution. Ross et al. (2004) observed that shutting down the trauma response to routine revictimization in the sex trade requires internal fragmentation and dissociation. The psychological symptoms suffered by our interviewees are largely a result of the organized cruelty perpetrated against them by pimps, traffickers, and prostitution or pornography sex buyers. Until more research is available, clinicians can draw on treatments developed for domestic violence, rape, torture, and childhood sexual abuse, which are common experiences among prostitution and pornography survivors (Herrington & McEachern, 2018). As in the case of battering relationships, safety is the first goal of treatment, often requiring case management skills (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997). Among the clinician's tasks is to discover whether or not a third party, boyfriend, or pimp is controlling the woman in therapy for the pimp's financial benefit. If a pimp is involved, the goal of psychotherapy must be to protect and extricate the client who is subjected to that control (Kahraman & Bell, 2017; Stark & Hodgson, 2004).

### *Limitations and recommendations for future research*

Despite our attempts to obtain a diverse sample that included currently active proponents of prostitution as "sex work" in addition to those seeking to exit, and despite interviewing in several cities in Sweden, we cannot guarantee that these results are representative of all people in prostitution or pornography production. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, English, and Spanish, but there are many other languages spoken in Sweden. We weren't able to provide interviews in other languages.

No between-group comparison was possible due to the overlap in experience with prostitution and pornography production. An important next step for research would be finding non-overlapping comparison groups. Despite this limitation, our sample was larger than previous research and was not recruited from a clinical population (e.g. El Khoury et al., 2024).

We hope that clinicians will be better able to recognize and understand the lifetime traumatic experiences of those who have been involved in the production of pornography. Future research might explore the use of screening questions so that clinicians ask all prospective clients about a history of prostitution and pornography production.

In conclusion, sexual exploitation and trafficking occur not only in direct-contact scenarios but also in camming and pornography production (Bishop-Royse et al., 2021). The fact that sexual abuse and rape are filmed and subsequently named pornography should not shield pornographers, pimps, or sex buyers from legal accountability (Alsalem, 2024; Waltman, 2021). Garb (1995) said that prostitution behind a camera is still prostitution and suggested that, with minimal modifications to currently existing laws, rather than profiting from exploitation and trafficking, pornpimps could be held accountable. Pornography can be understood as one type of prostitution that takes place as a result of technological advance (Bailov et al., 2015; Tyler, 2015; Waltman, 2021). Research submitted to the Swedish Parliament demonstrated clear links between pornography production and consequent exploitation, trafficking, violence against women, and psychological control by pimps. Those who were filmed appeared to share the same demographics and inherent harms as those in prostitution (Waltman, 2023).

We propose a conceptual and legal reconnection of pornography and prostitution. Pornography is best understood as a technologically mediated form of prostitution (Bailov et al., 2015; Tyler, 2015). Successful lawsuits against Pornhub/Mindgeek and GirlsDoPorn support our interviewees' accounts of criminal exploitation (Fleites v. MindGeek, 2021; Welsch, 2026).

The 2021 Swedish pornographer/pimp case described above is informative because of its numerous conceptual and legal errors. The pimping suffered by the victim falls within both Swedish and international

definitions of human trafficking. She was recruited and maintained in prostitution by her pimp under conditions of fraud, deception, and abuse of power. Her vulnerabilities were exploited for financial gain, and she was recruited, harbored, raped, tortured, and filmed by means of a combination of threats, use of violent force, addiction, debt bondage, and coercive mental control. As the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime states, the victim's consent to these abuses is irrelevant with respect to whether or not she was pimped or trafficked (Mejía, 2021).

Sweden has modified its law on prostitution so that it includes much online pornography in the definition of prostitution. The criminal act of "purchase of a sexual service" was changed to "purchase of sexual conduct," and the amendment to the law now includes specific examples of online prostitution with no physical contact (Informal translation of Swedish Government Bill 2024/25:124 by Max Waltman, July 17, 2025).

There is cause for optimism. Nonprofit organizations and other groups have spearheaded civil and criminal lawsuits against pornography producers and pornography sex buyers. For example, 22 women were harmed by pornography producers and distributors at the website GirlDoPorn. The successful lawsuit demonstrated the effectiveness of US civil remedies for women exploited in the sex trade. The recruiters at GirlsDoPorn published online advertisements for modeling jobs. The women who responded were lied to, pressured, tricked, deceived, and coerced by three pornpimps to perform acts of prostitution that were videotaped and uploaded to the Internet. The women had been promised that the film would not be uploaded to the Internet and that their true identities would not be revealed. They were given several alcoholic drinks before they were pressured and coerced into signing consent forms that were confusing and fraudulent. The women arrived at the pornography film studio, uninformed about the coercive demands the pimp/producers would make on them. Sometimes after extensive travel, they were instructed by pornpimps to either perform acts of prostitution or to leave without being paid. The 22 women brought the following civil charges against the GirlsDoPorn pimps: Intentional Misrepresentation, Fraudulent Concealment, False Promise, False Imprisonment, Sexual Battery, Gender Violence, Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress, Misappropriation of Name and Likeness, Negligence, Breach of Contract, Unlawful and Fraudulent Business Practices. Criminal trafficking charges were later added to the civil charges against the pornographers. The 22 women were awarded USD $13 million in damages against the website's operators (Doe, 2017).

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## ORCID

M. Alexis Kennedy http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9327-0194

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