

The cultural harm of rape pornography

Erika Rackley and Clare McGlynn consider the evidence for this ‘cultural harm’ and argue that education is the best way to counter it.



Whether it's the Sun's stunts around the final disappearance of images of topless women on its Page 3, or members of the senior judiciary appearing to assert the existence of [a causal link](#) between pornography and violent crime, pornography is never far from the news headlines. And as offences criminalizing the [publication of private sexual images](#) (commonly called 'revenge porn') and the [possession of pornographic images of rape](#) came into force in Britain in spring 2015, we can be sure that there will be continue to be commentary asking for 'hard evidence' of the harm of pornography.

Generalisations are unhelpful here. It goes without saying that the type and extent of 'the harm of pornography' varies according to the form it takes, as well as the context in which it is produced and consumed. Even if we agree on the harm of a particular form of pornography in a particular context, we may still differ on how, if at all, we should respond.

So let's focus on a particular genre of pornography: so-called 'rape pornography'. The harm of pornographic images of rape is in their contribution to a climate in which sexual violence is (or at least appears to be) condoned, and in which equality and dignity are not protected – in their perpetuation of what we've [described elsewhere](#) as a form of 'cultural harm'.

What is the cultural harm of rape pornography?

Pornographic images of rape present rape as a source of sexual arousal. Even if the pornographic image or video is 'simulated', that is, where the actor has said yes to saying no, these works legitimate and downplay the harm of rape. In so doing, the images contribute to a culture in which

sexual violence is normalized – eroticized even – and where there is less respect for women’s autonomy. [Research by Rape Crisis \(South London\)](#) in 2011 found that that all of the images on the (then) top 50 freely accessible rape porn sites depicted *women* being raped. This in turn leads to a society where, at the very least, rape is less likely to be recognized as rape (by the police, juries, the victims themselves), where it is less likely to be investigated, where rape myths are harder to challenge and so on. Indeed this is something we can see playing out in police stations and in courtrooms, and in a myriad of social settings, across the country.

Cultural harm – the context

The cultural harm rape porn causes is evidenced in a number of ways. [Research by the British Board of Film Classification](#) on adult audiences and the portrayal of sexual and sadistic violence in films found that: “There was ... concern that positive portrayals of ... rape could normalise such behaviour ... Many voiced anxiety for the potentially damaging impact of watching films with sexual violence for the formation of harmful attitudes among viewers, particularly for young men”. There is also a growing body of evidence to show that pornography informs attitudes toward sex, particularly among young people. [Research for the Children’s Commissioner](#) in 2013 found that young people are turning to pornography for guidance on sex, are engaging in riskier behaviour as a result of viewing pornography, are uncertain as to what consent means and are developing harmful attitudes towards women and girls.

But, even without this research, that pornography might have such an impact is not surprising. Our attitudes and behaviour are shaped (though not exclusively) by our social environment. Where pornography is part of that environment, it is reasonable to expect it to be one contributing factor to these attitudes. The sort of contribution pornography makes to our attitudes, and so to the behaviour that exemplifies those attitudes, will, we might expect, vary depending on the sort of pornography we are exposed to. Pornography which eroticises rape is pornography which is likely to encourage attitudes which take rape less seriously. This is likely to create a culture where sexual violence is, if not accepted, at least normalised.

To be clear: to argue that rape pornography causes this sort of cultural harm is not to argue that exposure to rape pornography causes rapes, although some research suggests that it does. As far back as 1995, the [United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women Report](#) suggested that pornographic depictions of rape were one of the “factors contributing to the continued prevalence of such violence [against women], adversely influencing the community at large, in particular children and young people.” More recently, a 2014 [End Violence Against Women briefing on porn and violence against women and girls](#), detailed ‘practice-based research’ gathered by the Women’s Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (Cornwall) in which pornography generally was said by the women interviewed to have played a central part in their experiences of domestic violence.

But can we prove it?

Nonetheless, one common response to the cultural harm argument is to suggest that it is nothing more than [assertion](#). Evidence to support the impact pornography has on attitudes – particularly on those of young men – in relation to sex and sexual violence lacks the specificity desired by some critics who demand that we need to connect particular rapes to the defendant's own exposure to particular pornographic images of rape. And without such proof of direct causation, it is argued, [typically invoking John Stuart Mill](#), that there can and should be no prohibition.

But this is not the end of the matter. As Mill himself said: 'It is the business of the law to prevent wrongdoing, and not simply to patch up the consequences of it when it has been committed'. More to the point, we may never be able to devise a research project that can establish (or disprove) that exposure to pornographic images leads to specific acts of sexual violence. Individual acts of sexual violence will rarely, if ever, be the exclusive product of one immediate stimulus. But the fact that we cannot test for this does not mean we ought to proceed on the basis that no such connection exists. The absence of evidence connecting exposure to rape pornography to real-world rapes is not evidence that there is no such connection. And, in any case, the absence of such evidence does nothing to counter the claim that rape pornography contributes to a culture in which sexual violence is overlooked and downplayed.

The cultural harm argument denies a simplistic link between pornography and sexual violence, such that a person who watches rape pornography might then be triggered into committing rape. Rather the argument is that this sort of pornography contributes to a culture and a set of attitudes – one which is not universal but which extends beyond those who have viewed rape pornography – in which rape and other acts of sexual violence are less likely to be recognised as such, and are less likely to be investigated or prosecuted. Rape pornography thereby plays its part in shaping a cultural context conducive to high levels of sexual coercion.

Of course, in an ideal world we would try and test for this sort of causal connection too. But trying to establish this sort of diffuse causal connection is likely to prove even harder than establishing the sort of simplistic link desired by opponents of the cultural harm argument. But, as before, our inability to prove this is not in itself a reason for thinking that these connections do not exist. Rather, as in any situation where causation is unclear, we are left having to make a determination on the balance of probabilities: is rape pornography more, or less, likely to contribute to a culture which is conducive to problematic attitudes and practices towards rape and sexual violence?

In the absence of some sort of empirical measure or experiment, one way we could think about this is to ask ourselves what would have to be true for rape pornography to have no such impact on attitudes toward sexual violence. The cultural harm argument could be refuted if it were true that cultural factors, including rape pornography, play no part at all in shaping attitudes towards and forms of sexual violence. Alternatively, while one might acknowledge a role for cultural influences on those who perpetrate such crimes, it might be argued that, of all the things that shape or influence social values and attitudes, rape pornography is not one (or, if it is, then it does so in a positive way – in which case, we might think, it should be required viewing).

Both responses seem implausible. Unless we really do think that sexism and tendencies towards sexual violence are simply and exclusively genetically predetermined, then these attitudes and actions must come from somewhere. They must be, in part, a product of one's environment. If we accept that our cultural environment influences our attitudes and values, the question becomes what aspects of this environment contribute to particular attitudes. If we are concerned specifically with attitudes towards sex generally, and sexual violence in particular, then it would be surprising if pornography generally, and rape pornography in particular, was not one such contributing factor. (This is not to imply that all those who watch rape pornography hold such views or that that rape pornography is the only influence on such views). However, it seems likely that rape pornography is indeed a factor – among any number of other factors – that is likely to encourage and sustain a way of thinking where women's sexual autonomy is less likely to be valued. And, on this basis, we have reason for thinking that rape pornography is more likely to be culturally harmful than not.

A consent culture

Of course, even if we accept that we have established the cultural harm of rape pornography, the next step is to consider whether this requires a response. Some may accept the cultural harm argument, but step back from any form of legal or other restriction on the material. Others may focus on regulatory mechanisms to limit access to the material, such as opt-ins/outs from various filters, or on specific tax regimes for websites or users. During its legislative scrutiny of the rape pornography provisions contained in Criminal Justice and Courts Bill, the [Joint Committee on Human Rights](#) made the argument in favour of criminal regulation:

“We welcome, as a human rights enhancing measure, the provision in the Bill to extend the current offence of possession of extreme pornography to include possession of pornographic images depicting rape and other non-consensual sexual penetration. We consider that the cultural harm of extreme pornography, as set out in the evidence provided to us by the Government and others, provides a strong justification for legislative action, and for the proportionate restriction of individual rights to private life (Article 8 ECHR) and freely to receive and impart information (Article 10 ECHR)”.

While we have [argued elsewhere](#) for the criminal regulation of rape pornography, the most important policy response to the cultural harm of rape pornography is to provide education as a means of effecting cultural change. This means specialist, high quality and compulsory sex- and relationship-education in schools. Beyond schools, it means the promotion and development of a positive consent culture: a focus on an enthusiastic ‘yes’, not the absence of a ‘no’. It means the end of a sexual culture of coercion and sexual pressure that is the experience of many. The criminal law can only play a small part in reducing the prevalence of sexual violence, and in changing the underlying culture that generates and legitimises such harm.

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NGOs and women's groups in England & Wales and Scotland on pornography regulation, including supporting the campaign to amend the extreme pornography laws to include pornographic images of rape led by Rape Crisis (South London) and the End Violence Against Women Coalition in 2013.

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