Research brief: Pornography

Introduction

This brief summarises findings from a study on social norms and pornography in Timor Leste, 2021. The study is part of the Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls. The Spotlight Initiative is a global joint European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) program.

This brief summarises key findings and presents recommendations from the pornography component of the study. Data informing this brief was collected via focus group discussions with young women and men with and without disability. Further information on the research, including methods and limitations, are available in an accompanying full report.

The Ministry of Education has noted interest in revising Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Timor-Leste in response to concerns that pornography is now widely accessible via digital technologies. The pornography component of the study addressed the following question:

1. How do young people consume pornography and how is this considered to shape their understandings of, and attitudes towards, violence against women and girls, and how does this vary by gender and disability?

Pornography

In this study, pornography is understood as material designed to sexually stimulate or arouse a feeling of sexual desire.[1,2] This includes images, video or film, and literature. Deliberately, participants in this study were not presented with a definition of pornography. Instead, what participants understood as pornography was explored.

Summary findings

*   When considering pornography, clear distinctions were made between what is done in private between married couples and what may be shared and seen in public. The former was not considered a concern. The latter was a concern.

*   Reflecting the dominant social norm that pornography is bad, the impacts of consuming pornography were described negatively in the main. The examples provided were speculative, but could be extreme. For example, consuming pornography leads to early and unwanted pregnancy, incest, and rape.

*   Positives were also noted, such as providing personal pleasure, and viewing pornography was considered to be commonplace amongst both young men and women by most participants.

[1] Cornog M. 1991. Libraries, erotica, pornography. Oryx Press, Toronto.
[2] Sprague, C. 2021. Pornography. Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health. New York.

- The negative impacts of consuming pornography were only considered to be an issue for other people who could not control themselves. Respondents who said they viewed pornography noted they experienced no negative impacts themselves.

- Examples of 'revenge porn' and sharing of private sexual images were reported.

Recommendations

- **Consider that any directs links between consuming pornography and violence remain inconclusive.** This study does not add any clarity on whether there is a direct causal link between consuming pornography and an increase in violence against women and girls. This remains an open question. The more extreme examples of the consequences of consuming pornography, such as incest or rape, provided by participants were largely speculative. That is, things they felt could happen. As with the findings on social norms, we should assume that other factors, beyond consuming pornography, influence an individual's actions.

- **Clearly define the purpose of interventions targeting pornography.** Opinions regarding pornography were mixed. On the one hand, children viewing pornography was considered unacceptable. On the other hand, what consenting adults did in their own time was considered a private concern. It is understood that the dominant social norm is that viewing pornography is bad. Regardless, people continue to consume pornography. This suggests that efforts to ban or restrict access to pornography will be challenging and may not be effective.

- **Explore strategies that focus on the responsible use of technology.** Access, consumption, and sharing of pornography is facilitated by digital technology. This was to the extent that pornography was considered a modern phenomenon by many. The accessibility and availability of internet enabled smart phones with cameras, also means pornographic images and videos can easily be produced and shared. Examples of inappropriate sharing and reports of 'revenge porn' were concerning. Considering mixed attitudes to pornography, as noted above, emphasising the responsible use of technology as an entry point for changing behaviours warrants further exploration.

- **Ensure comprehensive sexuality education addresses both existing and emerging issues and behaviours.** Despite common beliefs that viewing pornography is resulting in unwanted pregnancies and early marriages, any link remains unproven. Improving young people's access to information about contraception and related support and services would be a more effective way of addressing these issues than targeting pornography as the focus of behaviour change interventions. At the same time, sexuality education needs to address emerging issues, such as revenge porn noted above, if it is to remain comprehensive and relevant to young people today.

- **Ensure children and young people with disability have equitable access to comprehensive sexuality education.** It is important that children and young people with disability have the same opportunities to access and benefit from comprehensive sexuality education. There were no notable differences in responses from young people with and without disability in terms of access to, and consumption of, pornography. However, globally children and young people have less access to education and information than their peers without disability. Ensuring equitable access will require delivering comprehensive sexuality education

through both the formal education system and other channels, such as working with organisations of people with disability.

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