

# It's time to talk about porn

Irish attitudes on the links between pornography, sexual development, gender inequality and violence against women and girls.

**November 2022**



**Women's Aid**

# Introduction

Women's Aid presents the findings of this research with urgency. The results of a national representative survey<sup>1</sup>, conducted by RedC, confirm that the Irish public are as concerned as we are about the pervasiveness and harm of pornography in society. Across all ages surveyed, the Irish public is deeply concerned that exposure to and consumption of pornography is negatively impacting children and young people<sup>2</sup>. The majority believe that it is contributing to gender inequality, sexist double standards, unrealistic sexual expectations, normalisation of requests for sexual images including among children, and directly contributing to coercion and violence against women and girls, including image-based sexual abuse.

This survey indicates that there is a majority view across all ages that both the government and tech companies need to do more to protect children and young people from exposure to pornography and to do far more, faster, to support victims/survivors of image-based sexual abuse. There is strong support for age-appropriate education for children and young people about sex, relationships, mutuality, consent, and respect as part of school SPHE and RSE curriculum. This should include a focus on how pornography is not representative of any of these things.

<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted in October 2022 using the RedC Online Omnibus, the Red Line. The Red Line reaches a representative sample of the adult population, 18+ with interlocking quotas to provide extra confidence in sample profile. Data was weighted across gender, age, region, social class and ethnicity, to ensure a nationally representative sample based on latest CSO projections. **934 of 1,005 respondents felt comfortable taking part in the survey.**

<sup>2</sup> Young people in this survey are people aged 15-24 in accordance with the United Nations definition of Youth <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>.



## The difference in male and female attitudes

Despite this majority consensus in the study there is a very notable and statistically significant difference between male and female attitudes and levels of concern about pornography. Women are more concerned and see it as more harmful than men do. The survey also found that there is a majority belief that pornography undermines men's respect for women, but not that it reduces women's respect for men. This is most likely explained because pornography consistently and disproportionately portrays women in extreme degrading, humiliating and dehumanised ways and because the most negative impacts of pornography in Ireland are experienced directly by women and girls.

This finding makes clear the urgent need to learn more about these lived experiences and attitudes through greater research, and to have open and honest conversations in society between young people and adults of all genders about how pornography impacts their lives in different ways. Creating safe and open ways to share perspectives can help increase understanding, equality and mutual respect – and diminish the negative influence of pornography on relationships and intimacy.

## Why Women's Aid commissioned this research

In recent years, we have witnessed with alarm how technology has made pornography increasingly accessible, to children and young people in particular. Through our work with young women as part of the Women's Aid Too Into You<sup>3</sup> project, we know that pornography harms both girls and boys, by influencing unrealistic understanding of sex, normalising disrespectful sexualised behaviour and promoting misogynistic, and often coercive and abusive, sexual expectations – particularly of girls and young women. In 2021, Women's Aid research found that over 3 in 5 of young people surveyed disclosed that they had viewed pornography, 75% of men and 50% of women with the average age starting at 14<sup>4</sup>.

As a leading national organisation that has been working to prevent and address the impact of intimate partner violence and abuse since 1974, we have long heard from women accessing our frontline services that pornography has played a role in the verbal, sexual and physical abuse they have been subjected to. The levels of physical aggression during sexual assaults are shocking, with women disclosing that they have been strangled to the point of unconsciousness during sex and have been called the most horrific names. Women have disclosed

<sup>3</sup> [www.toointoyou.ie](http://www.toointoyou.ie)

<sup>4</sup> Women's Aid (2021) Yes, It's Abuse: Young people's understanding of & attitudes to intimate relationship abuse. Available at: [https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/yes\\_its\\_abuse\\_-\\_young\\_peoples\\_understanding\\_of\\_attitudes\\_to\\_intimate\\_relationship\\_abuse.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/yes_its_abuse_-_young_peoples_understanding_of_attitudes_to_intimate_relationship_abuse.pdf)

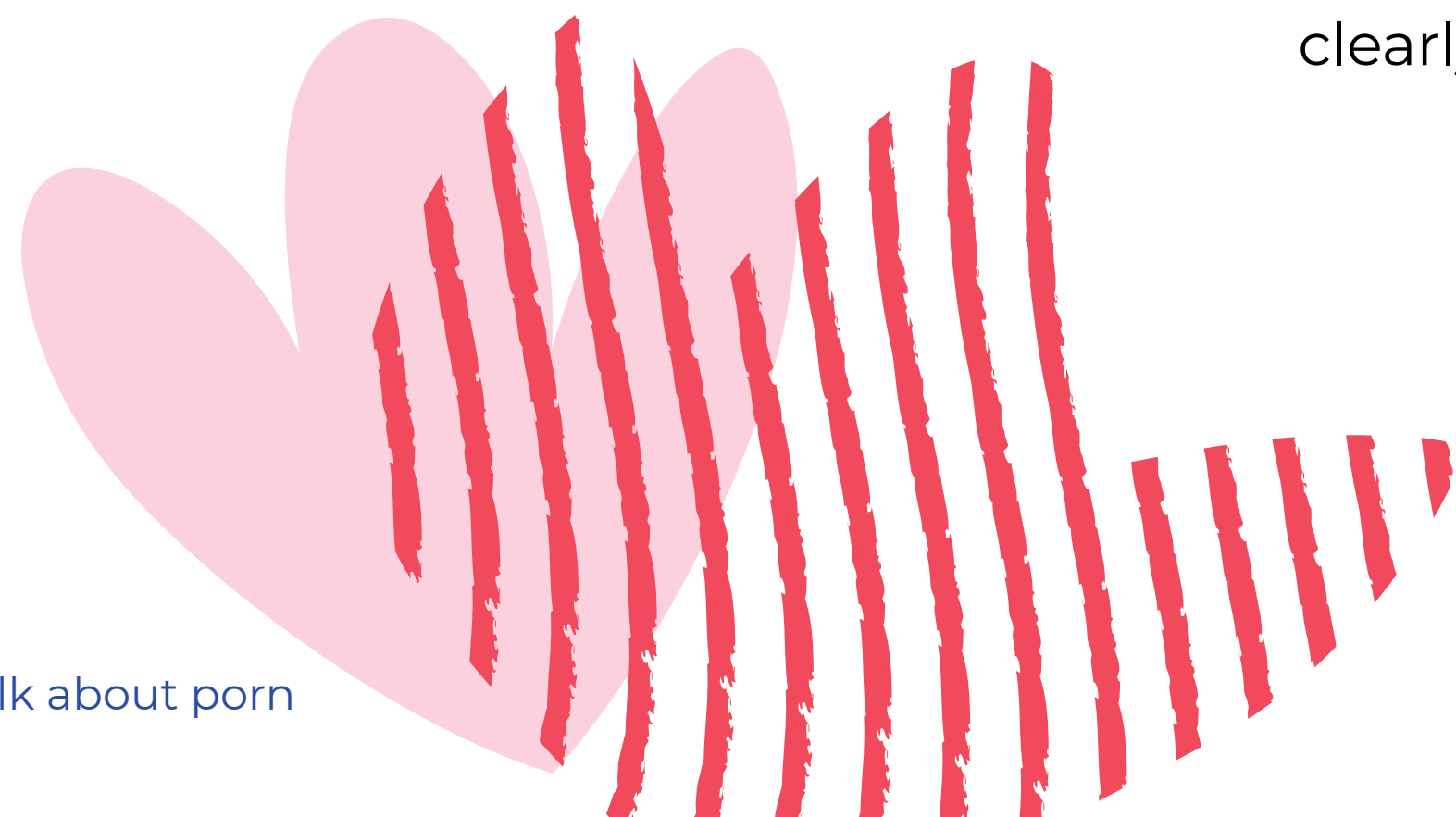
that their abusers have forced them to watch and re-enact pornography. This includes disclosures where women have been raped and coerced into sexual acts, including with other men. Women have also disclosed that their partners have criticised and compared them with women featured in pornography.

Women have also reported that children have been exposed to inappropriate content on their fathers' phones including dating sites and sexualised photos or pornography.

We have also offered support to women who were recorded having sex without their consent or through coercion and whose intimate images were circulated online, including on porn sites. Women have been threatened by their partners or exes to have images shared with others unless they gave in to their demands.

That is why Women's Aid conducted this research. We wanted to understand if the concerns about pornography we, and many of our colleagues in both the domestic and sexual violence support services, as well as many organisations working with children, were shared by the public. We wanted to measure the Irish public's attitudes and feelings about the availability and impact of pornography and the links with image-based sexual abuse and intimate partner violence. We also wanted to ascertain where precisely we, as a society, feel more needs to be done to ensure healthy sexual development for young people, to foster respectful and equal intimate relationships and to combat the harm of pornography and image-based sexual abuse.

The findings of this study, combined with some significant research already published, helps us understand where the main concerns lie in Ireland and will, we hope, help prioritise actions that can be taken by government, private business, civil society, and society at large to effectively address these shared concerns so clearly highlighted by the results.





## It's time to make the connection

Pornography is both underpinned by, and perpetuates, gender inequality. There is a growing body of evidence that has identified a relationship between viewing pornography and violent or abusive behaviour in young men. A 2018 study involving five European countries illuminated the relationship between regular viewing of online pornography, sexual coercion and abuse, and the sending and receiving of sexual images and messages. The study found that boys' perpetration of sexual coercion and abuse was significantly associated with regular viewing of online pornography. Viewing online pornography was also associated with a significantly increased probability of having sent sexual images/messages for boys in nearly all countries. In addition, boys who regularly watched online pornography were significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes.<sup>5</sup>

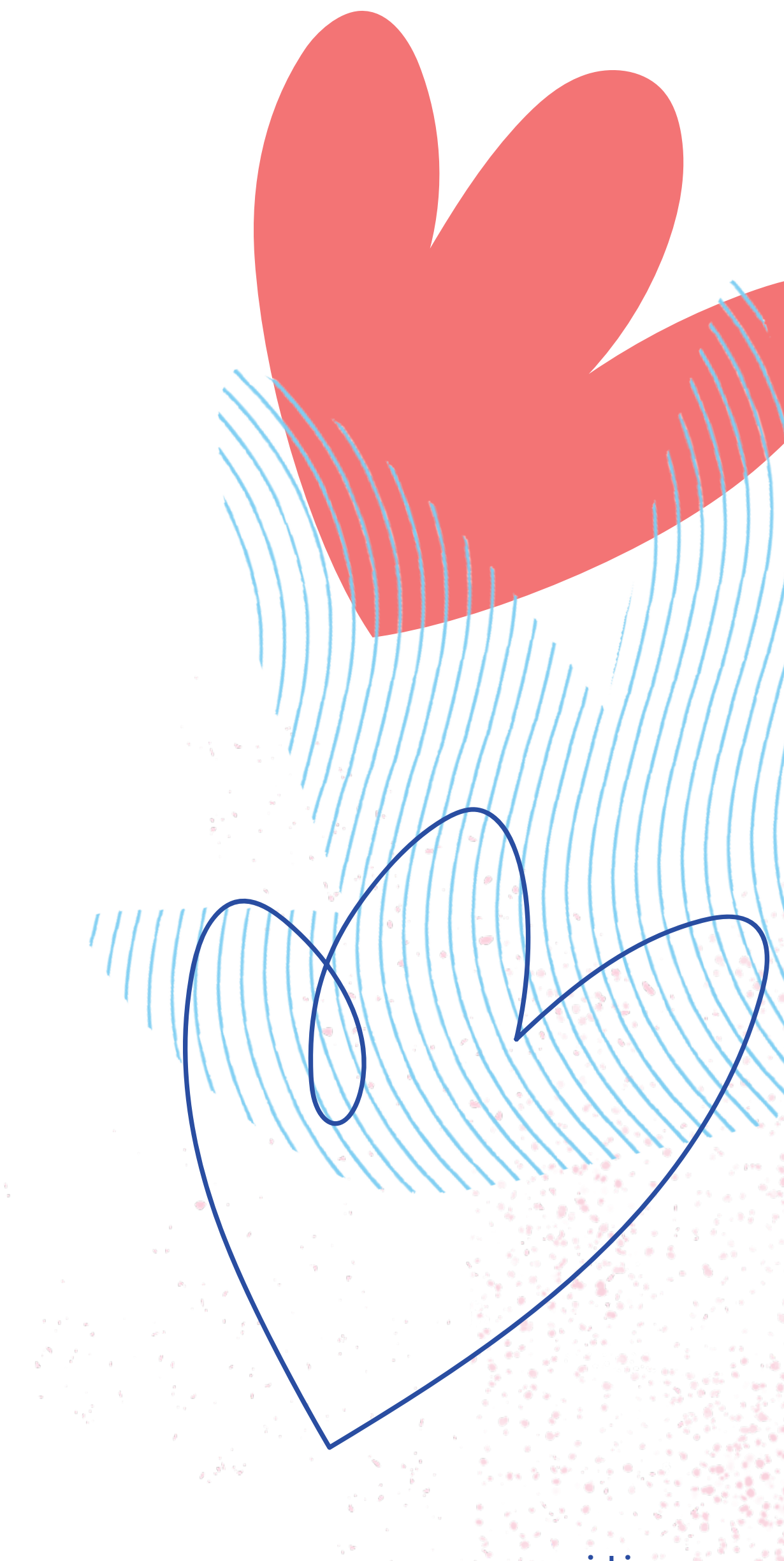
According to Dr Gail Dines, a leading international expert on pornography and founder and CEO of Culture Reframed, the average age a boy consumes pornography is between 8 and 11, proving that free porn sites are too easily accessible. According to Dines, pornography undermines the social, emotional, cognitive and sexual development of boys, and it is young girls who pay the price.<sup>6</sup> At an early age, young boys are exposed to material where women are being degraded, physically and verbally. Much, if not most, of today's mainstream pornography depicts hard core, body punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased.<sup>7</sup> Critically, Dines also highlights the harm that pornography does to men and young boys. The exposure to pornography at an early age is a traumatic and confusing experience. Evidence shows that the earlier you watch pornography the more likely you are to suffer with depression and anxiety and experience sexual dysfunction.<sup>8</sup>

5 Stanley, et al (2018) Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships: A European Study. J Interpers Violence. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26951609/>

6 Gail Dines in conversation with Sarah Benson, CEO, Women's Aid Ireland (2022), available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_Do1a54\\_Fc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_Do1a54_Fc)

7 Dines (2010) Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality.

8 Gail Dines in conversation with Sarah Benson, CEO, Women's Aid Ireland, op cit.



Women and men are represented in many different ways in pornography, but two things all pornographic images of and writings about them have in common is that females are characterised as subordinate to males, and their primary role is the provision of sex to men.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that more than one in every three porn videos depicts explicit sexual violence or aggression.<sup>10</sup> In fact, according to a study that analysed porn titles alone, one out of every eight titles that are suggested to first-time visitors to porn sites promoted acts of explicit sexual violence.<sup>11</sup>

Research indicates that consumers of pornography are more likely to sexually objectify and dehumanise others; more likely to express an intent to rape; less likely to intervene during a sexual assault, more likely to victim-blame survivors of sexual assault; more likely to support violence against women; more likely to forward intimate images without consent, and more likely to commit acts of sexual violence.<sup>12</sup>

## Time to talk about porn in Ireland

The connection between increased access to pornography and increased levels of violence against women is very real and is deeply concerning.

We have found that pornography is seen by most people in Ireland (71%) as harmful to society and that it is seen to negatively impact on young people's healthy sexuality/sexual development, and on gender equality and consent. While the majority of men do agree that pornography is harmful to society, the level of concern is significantly higher among women. This trend is consistent across almost every area of concern. Such a degree of gender disparity in attitudes on social issues is rare and the differences revealed in this report bear further scrutiny.

Most people agree (74%) that pornography undermines healthy sexual development for young people<sup>13</sup> and 75% of people believe that pornography makes children and young people more vulnerable to requests for sexually explicit images and videos.

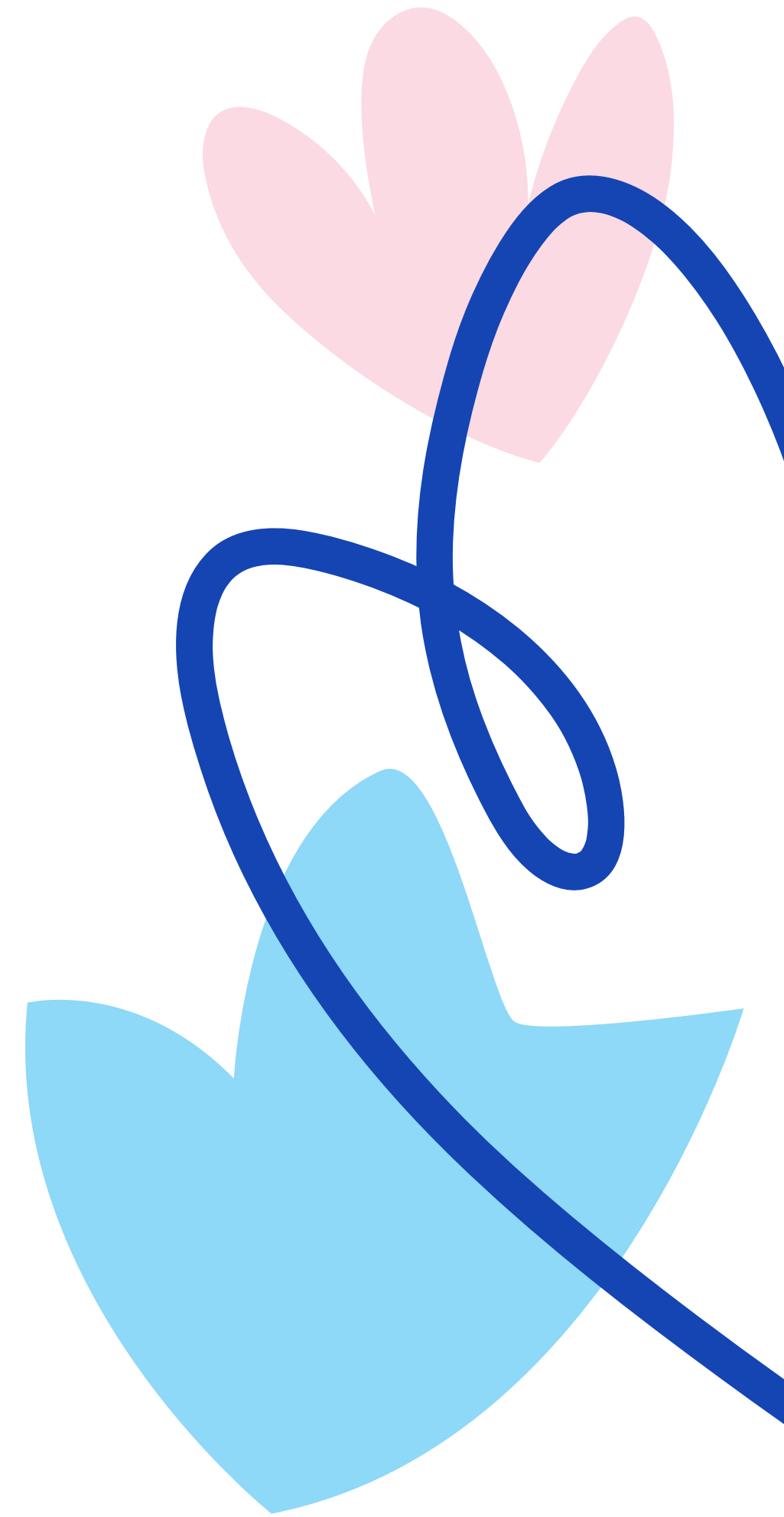
9 DeKeseredy & Funk (2022) The Role of Adult Pornography in Intimate Partner Sexual Violence Perpetrators' Offending, available at <https://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-can-worsen-real-cases-domestic-violence/>

10 Fritz, et al, (2020) A Descriptive Analysis of the Types, Targets, and Relative Frequency of Aggression in Mainstream Pornography, available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-020-01773-0>

11 Vera-Gray, McGlynn, et al, (2021) Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography. The British Journal of Criminology, available at <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/61/5/1243/6208896>

12 DeKeseredy & Funk, op cit.

13 Young people in this survey are people aged 15-24 in accordance with the United Nations definition of Youth <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>.





We have also found that almost two thirds of people (63%) believe that pornography leads to increased sexual violence in society. With 65% of people believing that pornography undermines men's respect for women. One in two people (57%) believe that pornography increases inequality between men and women.

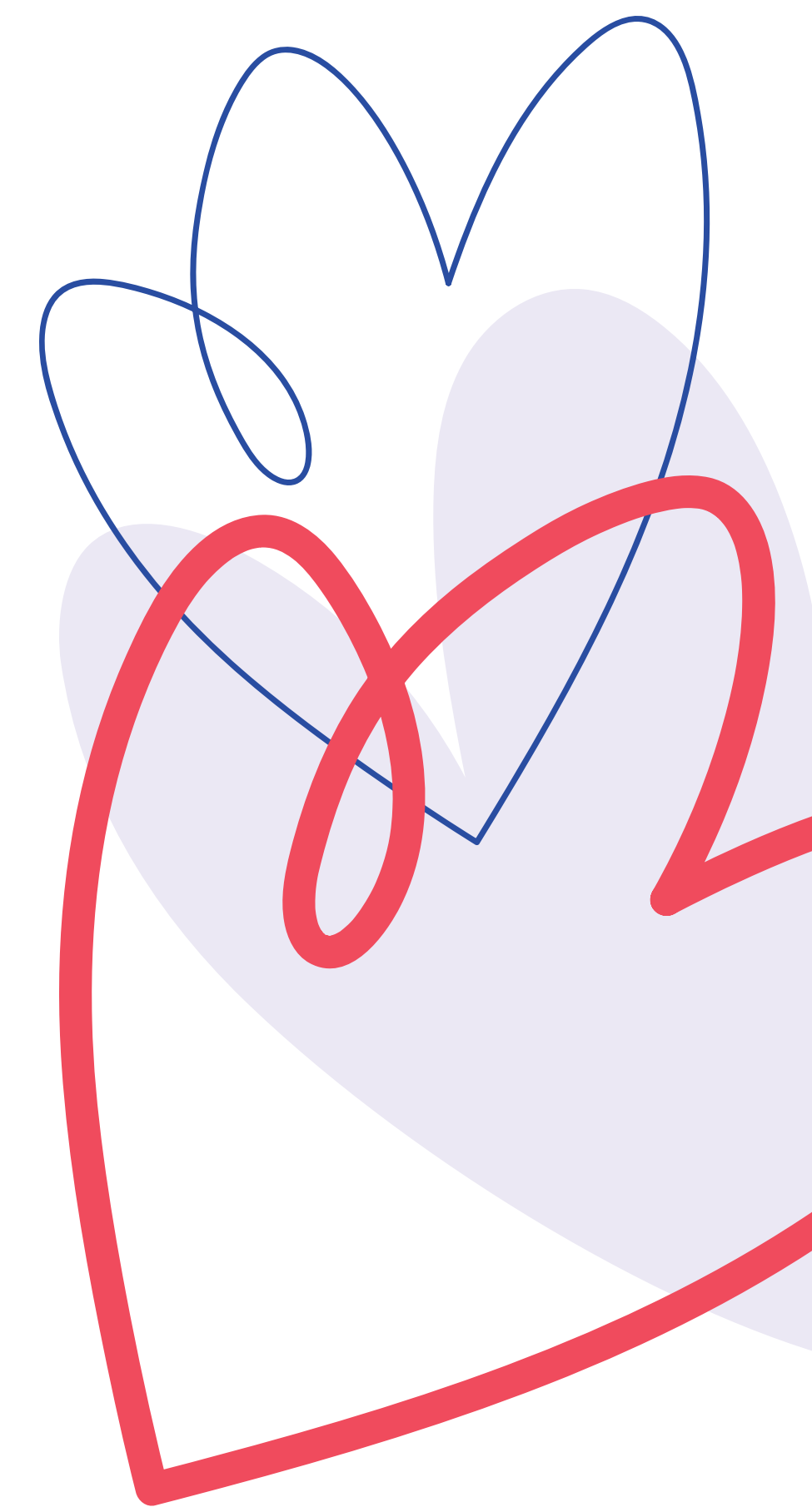
Revealingly, 76% of all young people surveyed (age 18-25) are concerned about the harm to society of current availability and prevalence of pornography and about the harmful impacts of pornography. They also believe that pornography is contributing to more frequent demand by some young men for rough/violent sex and undermining consent.

### It's time to act

The levels of domestic and sexual abuse are consistently high in Ireland and will remain so until we create a zero tolerance of all forms of male violence against women. It is encouraging that, for the first time, pornography is specifically named as an issue that needs to be challenged in the Irish Government's Third National Strategy to Prevent and Combat Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2022-2026. It is acknowledged that this needs to be addressed as part of the eradication of the social and cultural norms that underpin and contribute to gender-based violence.<sup>14</sup> The Implementation Plan for the Strategy contains two explicit actions to:

- Develop education and public information campaigns which raise awareness of the harm of pornography and of how the sex trade and pornography fuel misogyny and violence against women and undermine gender equality
- Develop specific age-appropriate information campaigns which highlight how pornography fuels misogyny and undermines gender equality.

<sup>14</sup> Zero Tolerance: Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2022-2026, available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a43a9-third-national-strategy-on-domestic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>



Women's Aid believes that this research is one of the first steps in opening the conversation, and supporting meaningful action on this issue. With this in mind we also make a number of clear recommendations:

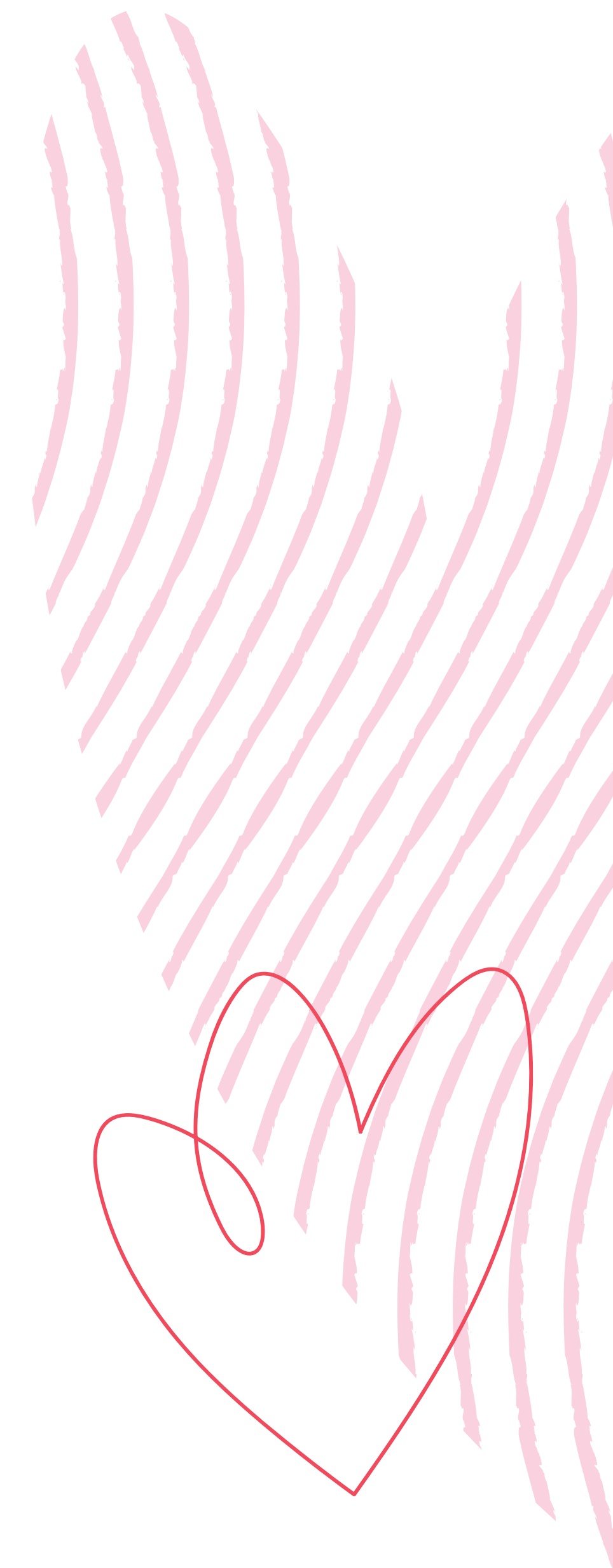
- 1. Research:** Further, more in-depth research is required focusing on scoping the scale and impact of the porn industry, the impacts on children and young people's healthy sexual development, image-based sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation in Ireland. Such research should also examine approaches that could potentially be employed to effectively limit children's exposure and access to pornographic content online (e.g., age verification measures in the UK<sup>15</sup>).
- 2. Education:** We need open, honest and age-appropriate sexuality and relationships education in schools at both primary and secondary level. Young people must be taught about healthy and unhealthy relationships in the context of promoting greater gender equality, respect and mutuality. We must create a Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme that supports young people, from early ages, to critically examine gender norms and dismantle belief systems that justify and enable

some men's violence. The Social and Personal Health (SPHE) curriculum, at Junior and Leaving Certificate level, should address the potential impact of pornography on children and young people. There is also a need to provide support for adults (e.g., parents, guardians and teachers) to talk comfortably to young people in their lives about the potential harm of pornography.

- 3. Safety online - legislation:** While much progress has been made in recent years to recognise the crimes of image-based sexual abuse, stalking and online harassment, more needs to be done.<sup>16</sup> Women's Aid strongly believes that we have an opportunity to protect children and adults alike with the current Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill. The proposed Online Safety Commissioner must be provided with the power to issue immediate take down orders in cases of image based sexual abuse specifically. Current progress with this Bill does not make a specific exception to prioritise the removal of this form of utterly devastating sexual abuse from online forums/sites, unlike other jurisdictions such as Australia which does. The more image-based sexual abuse material is allowed to go viral, the more

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/age-verification-for-online-pornography-to-begin-in-july>

<sup>16</sup> The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 created much needed offences in relation to image-based sexual abuse. However criminal prosecutions take time and, for a variety of reasons, do not always go ahead. In the meantime, the images are available and can be shared and re-posted numerous times. This can have a major impact on the survivor's wellbeing, mental health, employment and social connections. For many women, the most pressing concern is to have harmful content removed before it goes viral and causes significant and permanent damage. A fast, free and effective way to remove harmful content is needed.





difficult it is to eliminate it from the Internet and the more harm that is done. The Commissioner should be able to issue these orders against online services as well as against end-users who upload harmful material. These orders should also be issued to 'dark' or more illicit sites if required, including pornography and prostitution websites, where such material can also be widely circulated.

**4. Safety online - corporate responsibilities:** Tech companies, and particularly social media platforms, can do much more to create and make accessible supports to victims/survivors of image based sexual abuse. There needs to be vast improvements in responses to requests for removal of harmful content and a co-ordination between platforms so that those impacted, often in acute distress, do not have to try and contact multiple companies to remove the same contact from different platforms.

**5. Tackle an unregulated multi-billion euro**

**Pornography Industry:** Government should examine practical and effective measures that might be taken to target the business model of a wholly unregulated international industry with an appalling track record of exploiting vulnerable people, including children, for profit. There have been successes in other jurisdictions, such as the US, with class actions suits on behalf of trafficking victims and successful appeals to financial institutions providing vital infrastructure to the pornography industry. The potential to build on or leverage these actions to reduce the impact of the industry in the Irish context should be considered.

## It's time for zero tolerance

Women's Aid wants to see an equal Ireland with a zero tolerance of all forms of violence against women, including domestic abuse. To achieve this we must tackle gender inequality at the root. Challenging the omnipotence of the porn industry, and the harm it wreaks on women and girls, boys and men, as well as trans, gender-fluid and non-binary people is crucial to this. It is not an easy task. We are up against powerful forces of a multi-billion dollar industry, a laissez-faire attitude by tech companies who can, but are reluctant to, take more action to limit the access to pornography via their platforms or to act swiftly to try and reduce the harm of image-based sexual abuse online.

We need an honest and open conversation at all levels of society to begin to break the increasing influence that pornography has on our society, on our young people and on ourselves. Women's Aid will play our part. However, we cannot do it alone. Everyone needs to be involved in the conversations, the movement and crucially, the action, to fully eliminate misogyny, violence, abuse and inequality. Rejecting degrading and negative sexual and gender stereotypes and standing up to industries that perpetuate these, is to everyone's benefit no matter their sex/gender or gender identity - a benefit now and for future generations.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Benson".

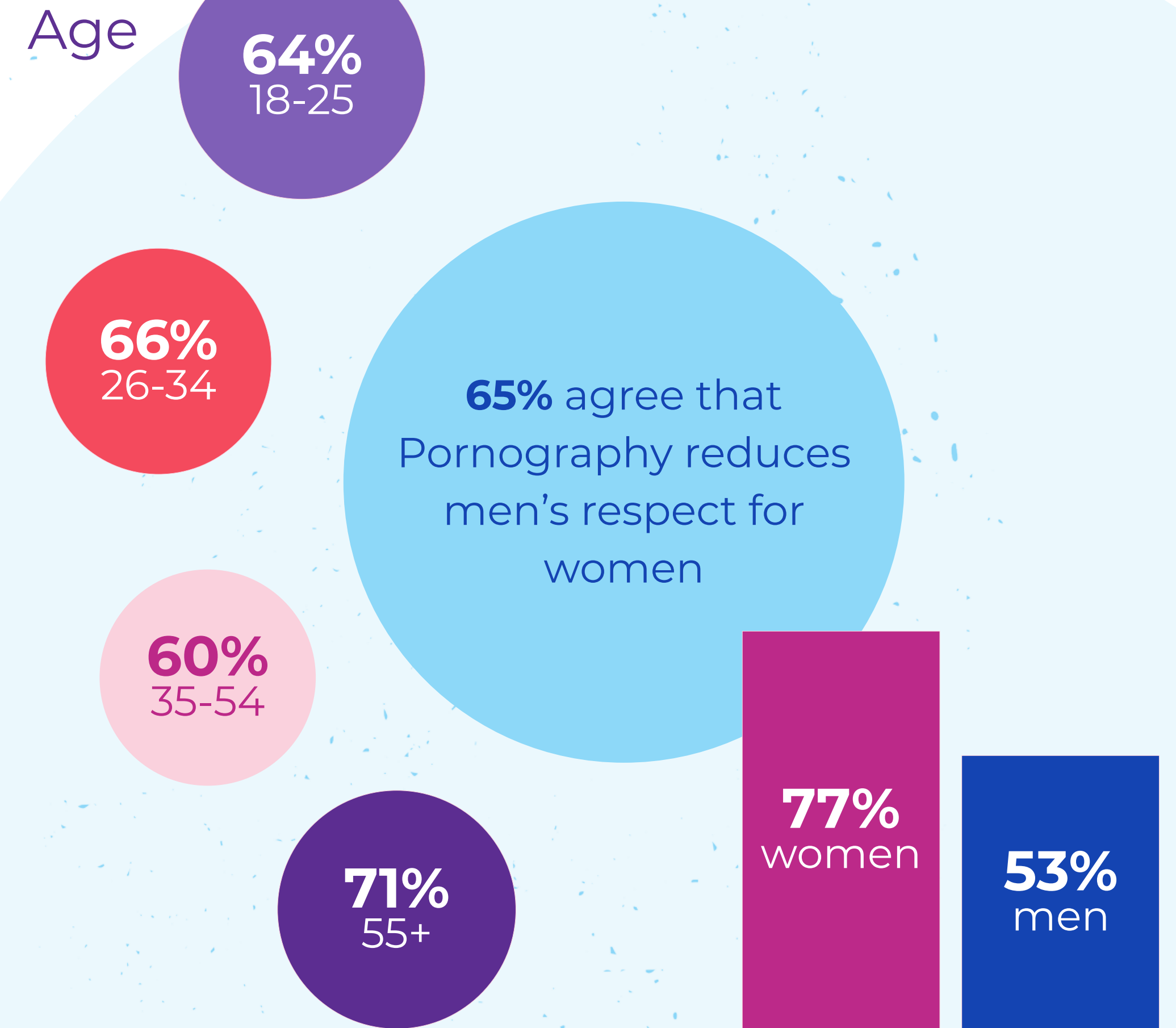
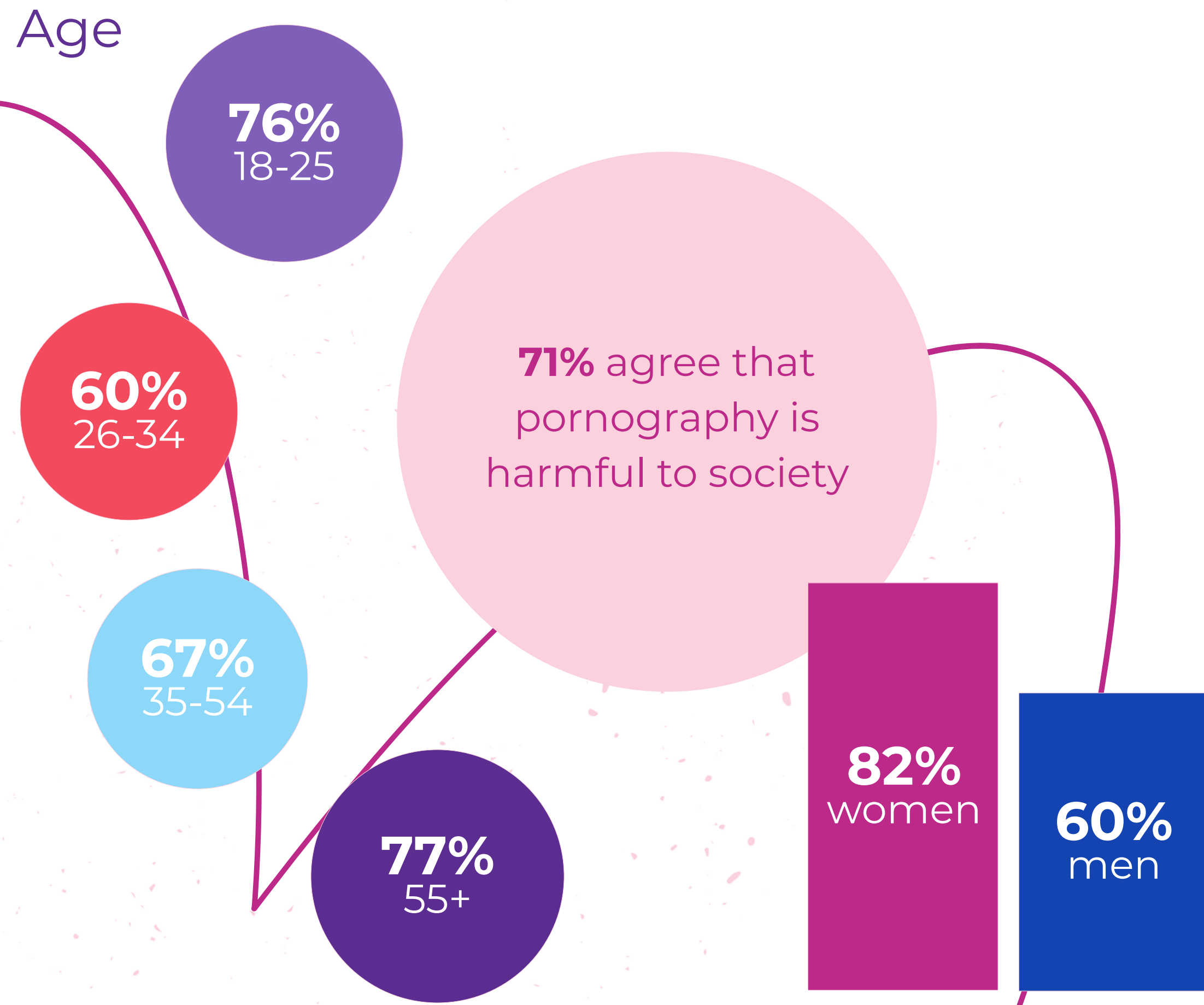
**Sarah Benson, CEO, Women's Aid**



# 10 Key Statistics

- 1.** Pornography is seen by the vast majority of the Irish population (71%) as harmful to society and pornography is believed to negatively impact sexual health development, gender equality and consent. While the majority of men (60%) agree that pornography is harmful to society, the level of concern is significantly higher among women (82%). This gender difference trend is consistent across almost every area of concern.
- 2.** Almost two thirds of people (63%) believe that pornography leads to increased sexual violence in society.
- 3.** 1 in 2 people (57%) believe that pornography increases inequality between men and women.
- 4.** 81% of young people (aged 18-25) agree that pornography increases men's interest in trying rough or violent sex.
- 5.** Most people agree (74%) that pornography negatively impacts sexual development for young people.
- 6.** 75% of people believe that pornography makes children and young people more vulnerable to requests for sexually explicit images and videos
- 7.** 65% of people believe that pornography reduces men's respect for women.
- 8.** 81% of people agree that we need an age-appropriate sexuality and relationships education in all schools which includes a focus on the negative consequences of exposure to pornography.
- 9.** 71% of the population believe that Government needs to do more to combat the negative impact of pornography.
- 10.** 71% believe that tech companies have the capability to end children's and young people's exposure of pornography and the same number agree that the Directors of Companies that exposure children and young people to pornography should be personally prosecuted.

# SECTION 1: Pornography and the Harm Done to Society, Equality and Links with Intimate Partner Abuse and Sexual Violence





Age

81%  
18-25

65% agree that  
Pornography  
increases men's  
interest in trying  
rough or violent sex

64%  
26-34

59%  
35-54

68%  
55+

75%  
women

55%  
men

Age

62%  
18-25

63% agree that  
Pornography  
increases sexual  
violence in society

53%  
26-34

61%  
35-54

71%  
55+

75%  
women

51%  
men

Age

69%  
18-25

60%  
26-34

57%  
35-54

69%  
55+

63% agree that  
Pornography  
undermines sexual  
consent in  
relationships

77%  
women

49%  
men

Age

50%  
18-25

50%  
26-34

54%  
35-54

66%  
55+

57% agree that  
Pornography  
increases social  
inequalities between  
men and women

70%  
women

44%  
men



Age

**36%**  
18-25

**44%**  
26-34

**44%**  
35-54

**53%**  
55+

**46%** agree that  
Pornography  
reduces women's  
respect for men

**50%**  
women

**42%**  
men

## SECTION 2: Concerns about the Impact of Pornography and Image-Based Sexual Abuse on Children and Young People

Age

81%  
18-25

83%  
26-34

83%  
35-54

93%  
55+

86% are concerned about children and young people sharing intimate images when asked for them by peers

93%  
women

79%  
men

Age

84%  
18-25

82%  
26-34

84%  
35-54

92%  
55+

86% are concerned about children and young people think it is okay to share intimate images of other people without their consent

94%  
women

79%  
men



Age

74%  
18-25

74%  
26-34

72%  
35-54

89%  
55+

**78%** are concerned about children's and young people's exposure to pornography

87%  
women

70%  
men

Age

77%  
18-25

71%  
26-34

72%  
35-54

79%  
55+

**75%** agree that Pornography makes children and young people more vulnerable to requests for sexually explicit images and videos

82%  
women

67%  
men

Age

80%  
18-25

68%  
26-34

68%  
35-54

80%  
55+

74% agree that Pornography undermines healthy sexual development for children and young people

81%  
women

66%  
men

Age

77%  
18-25

68%  
26-34

69%  
35-54

71%  
55+

71% agree that Pornography makes young people think that rough sex or violent sex is normal

80%  
women

61%  
men



## Age

**65%**  
18-25

**53%**  
26-34

**63%**  
35-54

**70%**  
55+

**64%** agree that  
Pornography makes  
children and young  
people think that  
performing in  
pornography is a  
normal job

**71%**  
women

**57%**  
men

## SECTION 3: Pornography and the Impact on Healthy Sexual Development for Children and Young People

**73%**

of people believe that we must end children' and young people's exposure to pornography if we are to foster healthy sex and intimate relationships.

**48%**

of people do not feel comfortable talking to children and young people in their lives about the potential harms of pornography.

**When asked about where young people are learning about sex:**

**30%** of people think from their peers. Only 2% think this is the ideal place.

**20%** said from internet search of pornography. Only 1% think this is ideal.

**13%** said from internet searches (excluding pornography). Only 2% think this is ideal.

**12%** said from social media. Only 1% think this is ideal.

**When asked about where young people should ideally learn about sex:**

**34%** said from parents and family. Only 6% believe this is currently the case.

**29%** said from Sexuality and Relationships Education in Secondary School. Only 7% believe that this is currently the case.

**24%** said from Sexuality and Relationships Education in Primary School. Only 6% believe that this is currently the case.



## SECTION 4: Responsibility for Action

**71%**

of people say that the Government should do more to minimise the harm of pornography in society.

**71%**

agree that the Directors of Companies that exposure children and young people to pornography should be personally prosecuted.

**71%**

believe that tech companies have the capability to end children's and young people's exposure of pornography.

## SECTION 5: Awareness of the Law

**85%**

of people know that it is against the law in Ireland to share intimate images.

**75%**

of people know that it is against the law to threaten to share intimate images without consent.

**89%**

of people mistakenly believe that stalking is a crime<sup>17</sup>.

**83%**

of people know that it is against the law to forward on intimate images received of somebody without their consent to other groups of people.

**66%**

of people know that sharing an image or video of yourself when you are under 18 is illegal.

<sup>17</sup> Stalking is not a specific stand alone crime currently. However, behaviours associated with stalking may be covered under existing legislation. Stalking is a proposed new offence in the Criminal Justice Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022.



Women's Aid

Women's Aid  
5 Wilton Place  
Dublin  
D02 RR27

womensaid.ie  
info@womensaid.ie  
+353 (01)6788858

24hr National Freephone  
Helpline 1800 341 900  
Registered Charity No. 20012045

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