

# BRIEF TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND REPUTATION ON PLATFORMS SUCH AS PORNHUB

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Dear Members of the Standing Committee,

The seriousness of the subject and the urgency to act require me to share the most important findings of my research concerning the **sexual exploitation of underage girls transformed into sexual commodities** by platforms such as Pornhub.

As an anthropologist with a PhD from Laval University, I spent my entire research career at the Centre de Santé publique de Québec. Between 1992 and March 2020, I spent my days doing field work with the most destitute people in the downtown area. It was there that I encountered the reality of female prostitution—a tragedy. I felt as though I was descending into the depths of human misery, which increased with every step I took.

I learned that **85% of those prostitutes were victims of incest, pedophilia and all types of sexual abuse and assault**, and that **60% of them were pushed into prostitution while they were still minors**. That percentage will only increase in the **contemporary context of the *pornification of society***. It is with THESE WOMEN and for THESE WOMEN that I wrote my latest book about getting out of prostitution: *Sortir de la prostitution. Une approche systémique et une pédagogie de l'empowerment*. Del Busso 2018.

There are three points that I feel are essential in order to provide a synopsis concerning privacy on platforms such as Pornhub:<sup>1</sup>

1. The social context of the *pornification* of contemporary society and its effects
2. A more accurate definition of “pornography”
3. Underage girls who are treated as commodities in the sex trade

## **1. The social context of the *pornification* of contemporary society and its effects**

To understand the characteristics of our social context with respect to sexuality, I will start with the social position assigned to prostitution. Barely a few decades ago, prostitution was considered shameful, disgraceful, degrading, despicable, reprehensible and a social taboo. Today, it is part of the **SEX INDUSTRY**, which includes escort agencies, street prostitution, erotic

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Quebec held a Select Committee on the Sexual Exploitation of Minors. The report, published in December 2020, is available in French and English and accessible at <http://assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/commissions/csesm/mandats/Mandat-41757/index.html>.

massage parlours, strip clubs, pornography, cybersex, web women, phone sex, sex tourism, sugar daddies and sugar babies, the international trafficking of women and children, and so on. It is part **of the commercial sex activities taking place around the world and supported by extremely powerful lobbies. It ranks third among the most lucrative international markets, after drugs and firearms.** These activities are associated with freedom and pleasure and are proposed **as models of sexual liberation, personal growth and self-realization.**

**How did we get to that point?** This social change can be explained by the globalization of international markets, which began in the 1970s, which revolutionized the way the global economy worked, involving the interdependence of national economies, extreme capitalism—referred to as savage capitalism—where, **FOR A PRICE, ANYTHING CAN BE SOLD, ANYTHING CAN BE BOUGHT.** At the same time that the web started to grow, this economic and social transformation took advantage of the vast social movement of the sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s—a radical and generalized challenge to Judeo-Christian tradition—while imposing and maintaining, under illusions of sexual liberation, the patriarchal sexual behaviours inherited from the past. Our language changed because of it, the word “prostitution” was **eliminated** and replaced with **SEX WORK**, and prostitutes became known as **SEX WORKERS, ESCORTS**, etc. Changing words amounts to changing reality. However, these new words did not **eliminate** the very serious and destructive consequences that commercial sex practices have on individuals who are considered to be sexual commodities and who, to be able to engage in these acts, completely dissociate from themselves. *Customers* and pimps do not experience any of these terrible consequences. **INSPIRED BY PORNOGRAPHY**, customers are using increasingly degrading language and behaviour, combined with escalating demands and violence.

This social context is open and conducive to SEX WORK. Our young people’s behaviour is being influenced by powerful messages from the **sex industry** and the **extraordinary availability of pornography**. Sex work and pornography are portrayed as **PATHWAYS** to a free and fulfilling sexuality **without any authorized and critical counter-narrative.**

**Working as an escort, stripper, erotic masseuse, etc., has become a status symbol for young teenage girls. These sexual activities are never considered or defined as prostitution but, in reality, that is what they are because they generate income. Calling each other “bitch” is no longer considered disrespectful. In their environment and elsewhere, ONLY STREET SOLICITATION IS CONSIDERED PROSTITUTION.** When they turn their first trick, they experience guilt. “Move on,” they’re told, “there’s nothing wrong with it!” Their shame is short-lived, their personal judgment, appreciation of their self-worth and their behaviours seem to be lacking or, at least, they are not evident. That lack of shame removes any inhibitions that would normally prevent these girls from engaging in prostitution. They end up in an environment that is conducive to

prostitution: runaways, in a financially precarious situation, possibly in love with their pimp, or they have run away from a youth centre.

Adolescent girls, young girls, as young as possible, little girls, children. It is on THEM, inside THEM, and through THEM that prostitution is carried out. Because they are human beings, the idea of sexual services obtained from those human bodies, all of the acts committed and words spoken are etched on their body, their spirit and their entire being and experienced as assaults, like a rape, even if there was consent.

Prostitution no longer exists, we no longer know what it is, yet at a minimum its definition is obvious: the exchange of sex for money. There is similar confusion for the term “sexual encounter,” whose definition is limited to intercourse and penetration. If there is no penetration, does that mean there is no sexual encounter! This reminds me of a father who always refused to acknowledge that he had committed several acts of incest against his daughter because, as he said, he had not penetrated her, only licked her. Masturbation in exchange for money **IS prostitution**; a “happy ending” (masturbation that concludes an erotic massage) **IS a paid sexual service and IS prostitution**.

Having become part of the SEX INDUSTRY, contemporary prostitution through pornography has become something normal, commonplace and nothing to be ashamed about. Because prostitution has been around for a very long time, everyone thinks they are knowledgeable about it, and **that belief is part of the problem**.<sup>2</sup> There is a lot of ignorance about what prostitution really is, what it is like for people who have been sexually exploited, and the disastrous, long-lasting consequences for these victims, their families and, more broadly, for society.<sup>3</sup> The reality of the facts and the definition of “prostitution” need to be reconsidered in order to identify a new social phenomenon that requires further study. That way, it would be easier to understand why and how *pornography is filmed prostitution, that it is inseparable from prostitution, inherently prostitutorial and that an X-rated film producer who recruits men and women to get them to have sex for money is a pimp*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. A more accurate definition of “pornography”

For Sociologist Sonny Perseil (political science), pornography is **PIMPING AT AN INDUSTRIAL SCALE, inseparable from prostitution and inherently prostitutorial, as they thrive on each**

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<sup>2</sup> It was Solon, an Athenian lawmaker in 600 BC, who introduced money into sex. Malika Nor, with the collaboration de Thibault Gautier. *La prostitution*. Paris, Le Cavalier Bleu, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth look at the issue and a more elaborate answer, see Chapter 3, *Mais qu'est-ce que la prostitution féminine*, in Dufour 2018, pp. 101–137.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added. Sonny Perseil, sociologist, researcher at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (France), “La pornographie, du proxénétisme à l'échelle industrielle.” *Prostitution et Société*, No. 192, pp. 10–11

**other**, just like people who profit from prostitution, he explains.<sup>5</sup> *While organized prostitution is considered pimping, pornography is not. While pornography cannot be reduced to prostitutional acts, it is essentially based on those acts: Actors are encouraged to have sex for money in front of a camera, making it difficult not to call it prostitution.*

*An X-rated film producer who recruits men and women to get them to have sex for money is a pimp. In addition, given that these activities generally involve many people, some of whom are perpetrators or accomplices, and that the producer uses a network of telecommunications that fall under aggravated procuring, the producer could be punished severely. And yet, the pornography industry is governed by business law, and production companies are commercial companies like the others.*

Consequently, says Perseil, *pornography and prostitution are inseparable; however, from a legal point of view, only prostitution is stigmatized. Why is a pimp who puts prostitutes to work in a studio imprisoned while someone else who films actresses in the same types of acts is encouraged to do so? One is deprived of his freedom; the other is rewarded. That is social arbitrariness—an aberration of the principle of equality before and under the law. While prostitutes who solicit and their pimps are prosecuted, pornographic actors, with their productions, are considered to be artists or businessmen. One group is seen as belonging to a stigmatized underclass, while the others are considered savvy executives. On this theme, Perseil concludes that from a legal point of view, filming prostitution makes it something else. The way we view activities should depend on what they actually are, not on the fact that they are mediatized. A very large number of workers are involved: those who organize, distribute, do the advertising or benefit from it: producers, directors, makeup artists, camera operators, all the broadcasters, TV channels, pay per view in hotel chains, media outlets, Internet, all of which make a percentage of their revenue through X-rated films, cable broadcast, satellite or radio relay networks. How could one imagine a major part of the economy being outlawed?*

*Furthermore and worse still, says Perseil, with easy access to the Internet, we are facing a real social problem that no one had anticipated. The number of children who have viewed pornography has increased considerably. Everyone can clearly see the hypocrisy of claiming that viewing pornography is prohibited for people under the age of 18. How does viewing pornography affect their development and sexual behaviours? The question could clearly show that pornography is ultimately more dangerous than other prostitutional activities. The debate is therefore open. How can one settle for such a social arbitrariness that is regulatory on one side and abolitionist on the other?*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://mouvementdunid.org/prostitution-societe/tribunes/sonny-perseil-sociologue/> [Available in French only]

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) is the authoritative psychiatric manual for mental health diagnoses. It already recognized **pedophilia**, an adult's sexual attraction to children, as a disordered sexual behaviour. For the revised edition of the manual, known as DSM-5, a team of Canadian psychiatrists suggested making a clear distinction between **pedophilia and hebephilia**.<sup>6</sup> *Hebephilia is an adult's sexual attraction for young adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 or 16.*

It is clear that pimps, street gangs, criminals, johns, etc., who provide or use these minors for sexual gratification are **all, men or women, hebephiles**.

### **3. Underage girls who are treated as commodities in the sex trade<sup>7</sup>**

**WE CAUSE THEIR PROSTITUTION** because the path into it is not only personal but also a societal phenomenon that transcends and encompasses personal stories and always involves the personal, family and social levels, **a complex synergy of the three levels that co-exist in the makeup of every person and that together form a social system of prostitution production**. To explain it, we must delve deeper into their **life stories**, identify the **systems that produce** this result and correctly identify our **social values**, which are not random.

**An overly brief summary of their personal stories: ALL of them were trying to escape** from a situation that had become unbearable and dangerous, and they ended up on the street for one of two reasons: their parents kicked them out because they could no longer handle them, or they left on their own initiative to escape from their family in order to save their life and/or protect their mental health. The street devours girls. THEY show great distress, an utter lack of self-esteem, emotional dependence; they do not know who they are and they are profoundly discontented with life. These teens are survivors, ending up on the street without knowing the rules or the dangers; they are woefully unprepared to run with the wolves or to fight with them, and they are not equipped for life!<sup>8</sup> Running away has led them to social deintegration and substance abuse, and has drawn them to dubious environments. What else could they have become other than what they did? NOTHING.

To survive, they took to the street, and the street met their needs. **Did they have anything to lose or gain by going there?** The answer is that they still had everything to lose but they thought that they had everything to gain! They were expected there, quickly noticed and picked up by predators: pimps, street gangs, criminals, johns, etc., who occupy and control the street, **all of whom are hebephiles**. These girls were unable to refuse what was offered to them as *sex work, escorting*, which meets their immediate needs and provides a status that is **highly regarded in**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hommes-et-faits.com/Dial/spip.php?breve25>, accessed on September 19, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed development of this theme, see *Des parcours qui basculent*, Dufour 2018, pp. 25–44.

<sup>8</sup> The journeys of Jade, Nancy, Valérie and Marcella, documented, are eloquent examples. See Dufour 2004.

**the current social context.** For many of these girls, *making a customer* increases their self-esteem. These customers compliment them on their beauty, personality, the interest that they arouse, their good *services*, etc. THE JOHNS send them numerous text messages to set up their next meeting, whereas THE GIRLS worry about displeasing them and not seeing them again, and THE JOHNS do everything they can to become *regulars*.

However, one cannot so easily offer their body and sex to just anyone. In addition to the events already mentioned and the contributing family and social context, there are **scarring sexual experiences**: incest and other pedophilic acts, sexual abuse/assault and other sexual acts involving one or more men, most often within their own family. Together, all of these conditions in someone’s personal history, family, the social context and its values contribute to prostitution.

**Social systems that contribute to prostitution**

Table 1. Seven social systems that contribute to prostitution

<b>Social systems that contribute to prostitution</b>	
<b>Systems in the family</b>	1. The system of incest: pedophiles-sexual abuse/assault, pedophilic acts 2. The system: Youth-Runaway-Poverty 3. The system: Having a mother who was or is a prostitute 4. The system: Having a spouse who is a gigolo and/or a pimp <sup>9</sup>
<b>System related to the individual</b>	5. Substance abuse and/or alcoholism
<b>Systems related to society</b>	6. The VERY great proximity of prostitution and the powerful narratives and lobbies of the sex industry <hr/> 7. Underage girls who turn to prostitution on their own initiative

To conclude, I would like to highlight two fundamental points. The first is the emergence of a new social phenomenon that has developed and appeared in the last few years, whereby young adolescent girls turn to prostitution on their own initiative, without having the background or the social and sexual history see in girls encountered on the street. **This led me to identify a seventh social system that contributes to prostitution, which I link to the pornification of our society.** See the table above.

I would also like to point out that a comparison of the underage group with the age-of-majority and mature groups revealed that the underage group had the largest number of prostitute systems. When girls at an early age experience several systems that contribute to prostitution and are victims of pedophilic violence, this is striking and adds to the seriousness of each

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<sup>9</sup> Because of their young age, these minors do not have a spouse, but if a pimp comes into the picture, the contributing system of *having a spouse who is a gigolo or a pimp* comes into play. Often, in this social context, these girls fail to understand this reality and are surprised when it is explained to them, given how blinded they are by their feelings of love. Awareness generally comes after the fact, when their relationship with the pimp/boyfriend has deteriorated.

situation. This means that the more numerous and serious these conditions are, the longer and more distressful the time spent in prostitution will be. The finding is disturbing because not only were these young girls subjected to the worst sexual violence at a very early age and on an ongoing basis, for long periods, sometimes by several abusers in their own family, but they then end up in prostitution as early as age 12 or 13. Men are ever-present in the lives of these young girls, who have been sexualized much too early. In every female prostitute, there is a little girl who has been murdered, wrote Dr. Jorge Barudy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation 1

Companies that produce pornographic activities and/or material are not ordinary businesses. In light of the text by S. Perseil, that their legal status and their definition be questioned, revised and reformulated in accordance with their reality.

### Recommendation 2

As long as society tolerates these pornographic production companies, that they be required to financially contribute to a fund for research on all the personal, family and social consequences of pornography.

### Recommendation 3

Clearly redefine the exchange of sex for money as prostitution.

### Recommendation 4

Immediately make available research findings on the consequences that paid sex has on individuals, family and society.