

What are the links between the pornography industry and sex trafficking?

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Abstract

This research paper's purpose is to investigate whether there is a link between sex trafficking and the pornography industry. This is to support Yada UK's vision to expand on their already impactful work supporting women in the sex industry, to focusing on more specific areas such as sex trafficking in the adult film industry, to provide advocacy and education around the dangers of participating in the consumption of pornography, and how it can indirectly support sex trafficking and human trafficking criminal gangs. The research method of choice is a literature review, a critical and comprehensive analysis of existing scholarly sources and research material focusing on this topic and other relevant areas of knowledge. The purpose of a literature review is to provide an overview of current knowledge, address gaps in previous research and identify other theories and methods used by previous scholars and how that has evolved over time.

Despite previous research looking into the links of sex trafficking and sex work such as prostitution, research on pornography and sex trafficking is much more limited, especially when it comes to new forms of pornography such as Onlyfans. This research gives insight into how these emerging platforms operate and how it has affected the pornography industry and sex trafficking. Additionally, it looks into how international law determines a case of sex trafficking in the pornography industry.

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Introduction

Yada's vision is to eradicate sexual exploitation, abuse, stigma and violence towards women¹. Therefore, it is important to investigate different forms of sex work and how it exploits vulnerable women. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Pornography was ranked the 3rd most common form of sex trafficking, behind escort services and elicited massage businesses². This industry has always been a divisive and controversial topic. Those who are willing participants of pornography would argue it is 'empowering' to use their sexuality for a financial profit. However, critics, of which there are many, would argue that pornography is very problematic to society, and regardless of the fact that many women actively choose to participate in porn, there are still concerns around coercion and exploitation of young women, especially those who may experience poverty, mental health issues or abusive upbringings, families or relationships, which may hinder someone's ability to understand their own self-worth, and to recognise when someone is trying to exploit or abuse them for their own personal or financial gain. As well as being able to confidently stand up for themselves and remove themselves from harmful situations. Furthermore, there is also a worry about how consuming porn can create detrimental and unrealistic standards to people's sex lives, the beauty standards of how a woman should look, as well as the expectations men have towards women sexually, and their views in general towards women and relationships.

This research will delve further into the harms of pornography, who is targeted in trafficking operations, how they operate globally, and whether there is a correlation between either of these issues. Additionally, this research will investigate who are the main professional bodies helping to prevent the exploitation of women in sex trafficking and the pornography industry, and how they are approaching this issue through legislation, advocacy and funds.

Sex trafficking in International Law.

¹ Vision and values (no date) YADA. Available at: https://www.yadauk.org/Groups/351010/Vision_and_Values.aspx (Accessed: 14 June 2024).

² Polaris. (2020). 2019 data report: The U.S. national human trafficking hotline. Retrieved from <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf>.

The international community have struggled to collectively identify what exactly constitutes sex trafficking, thereby it has taken a long time to input a legal definition of sex trafficking into international law before the year 2000³, where the United Nations ("UN") Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children ("Palermo Protocol") was established⁴, and ratified by 146 states. Article 3: use of terms, of the Palermo Protocol is now internationally recognised as the official definition of trafficking:

(a) "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

(b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.

(c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article.

(d) "Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age⁵.

Finally having a definition which can be agreed upon by the international community should be beneficial in states being able to create their own domestic laws which can define what sex trafficking is. However, this international unity has not been as successful as one would have hoped, as there seems to be inconsistencies between the definitions of sex trafficking in some domestic criminal codes, in comparison to the mutual decision of the international community. These discrepancies undermine the international effort to combat sex trafficking as a crime. These concerns led to the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, in 2004, whereby an independent expert was tasked with advising the

³ Dempsey, M.M., Hoyle, C. and Bosworth, M., 2012. Defining sex trafficking in international and domestic law: Mind the gaps. *Emory Int'l L. Rev.*, 26, p.137.

⁴ Allain, J., 2013. 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. In *Slavery in International Law* (pp. 410-421). Brill Nijhoff.

⁵ UN General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2000, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/2000/en/23886> [accessed 24 June 2024]

United Nations on how to protect the human rights of trafficking victims through the submission of reports and recommendations, additionally investigating violations against those victims. The mandate was meant to last 3 years; however, it has been extended multiple times, with the last extension of 3 years being given in June 2023⁶.

Trends in sexual trafficking.

Trafficking for the use of sexual exploitation, can also be referred to as 'sexual slavery', whereby victims are viewed as property of their pimps and their customers, for the purpose of sexual pleasure, power or financial gain⁷. Victims are participating in sexual activities against their will, usually being forced through fear, intimidation and violence from sex trafficking groups, with little to no pay for their services. To combat sex trafficking it is crucial to understand the trends surrounding the recruitment of women in the trafficking industry. For example, are there certain types of characteristics and circumstances which make someone more likely to become a victim of sexual slavery? Studies show that women and girls make up many sex trafficking victims, which cannot be too surprising, however, what statistic is shocking, is how child victims make up 20% of victims globally, and in West Africa the statistics rise to nearly 100%⁸. According to the UNDOC, most victims have entered trafficking before the age of 18, with the average age of their first experience beginning between the ages of 12-15. This number alarmingly highlights the clear demand for child pornography and prostitution, and how traffickers facilitate this demand. It also suggests that we have a societal issue with the sexualisation of children which needs to be tackled immediately.

Other factors which can make someone more likely to be targeted for sex trafficking is when victims experience homelessness, poverty and extreme violence. Traffickers target these types of people as they are more vulnerable, and can exploit their need for money, dreams of a 'better life' or their desperation to get out of a difficult situation. Victims in these circumstances can be more easily coerced into sex trafficking as traffickers can trick them into thinking they can help them. For example, promises to get these women to move to 'richer' countries, with prospects of a job and greater opportunities to escape their current poverty or abuse is key to getting these women to agree to come and work for them, without them knowing the full extent of what they have signed up for. These factors also make it increasingly harder for victims to escape these sex trafficking rings as many are stranded in a different country, facing language barriers, incorrect citizen documentation, limited

⁶ Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, A/HRC/29/38, UN Human Rights Council, 31 March 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/unhrc/2015/en/105200> [accessed 24 June 2024]

⁷ Yen, I., 2007. Of vice and men: A new approach to eradicating sex trafficking by reducing male demand through educational programs and abolitionist legislation. J. Crim. L. & Criminology, 98, p.653.

⁸ Ibid.

knowledge of their new residence, lack of money and isolation as they are apart from their friends and family.

The Covid 19 Impact

Since the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, it has become increasingly more difficult for law enforcement to identify victims of sex trafficking. This has been particularly prevalent in developing countries, whereby authorities do not have the resources needed to appropriately combat sex trafficking during a turbulent period of uncertainty. In addition to the restrictions enforced during the pandemic, in attempt to prevent the spread of the virus, it led to many public places, such as nightclubs, bars, hotels and massage parlours, where sex trafficking networks would usually operate, to be closed, forcing them to run underground, in more concealed locations, meaning local law enforcements could not identify victims and networks of sex trafficking as easily⁹. Consequently, it means that the data found on the number of sex trafficking victims is likely to be underrepresented. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's global report on trafficking in persons, there was a decrease of 24% in the number of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the year 2020, compared to the previous year. This decrease was seen most in South America, North Africa, The Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Central America, the Caribbean and the Pacific¹⁰, where many authorities lack the finance and resources needed to combat sex trafficking effectively, especially during a period such as a global pandemic. These uncertainties in the data are concerning as victims will find it harder to pursue help if they are being undetected by local authorities and anti-trafficking organisations.

The links between the pornography industry and sex trafficking

It is undeniable that pornography has some involvement in the motivation of the international sex trafficking industry, however, would it be considered the main driving force behind these traffickers? This paper will investigate the seriousness of the links between these two issues. With almost fifty percent of sexually exploited women in nine countries reported being forced into pornography while sold for sex according to the author of the op-ed 'The Terrifying Connection Between Porn and

⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022), Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, Viena, United Nations.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Sex Trafficking', Vivienne Rachmansky, the link seems to worryingly be indisputable¹¹.

The most alarming part of this link is the involvement of the children in the pornography industry. In accordance with the 2000 Trafficking Victims Act, any commercial sex act with a minor is legally defined as sex trafficking, in addition to the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material (also referred to as "child pornography"), which also qualifies as a form of sex trafficking¹². Unfortunately, child pornography is a very real issue within the age of modern technology. In 2023, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) had 392,665 reports of explicit child sexual abuse content on the internet, a 5% increase from 2022¹³. This is evidence of an unsettling issue we have in our society, as the amount of content that is shown online suggests there is a demand for it. The 392,665 is only the counts which have been reported to the IWF and is clearly just the tip of the iceberg to this international problem. Examples where there is a clear link between sex trafficking and child pornography, include a case of 15-year-old girl who had been missing for over a year and was found because 58 videos of her rape and sexual abuse were discovered on porn sites. Furthermore, CEASE recently spoke with a rape survivor who had discovered videos on a porn site of her assault, kidnapping and rape at the age of 14. Shamefully, her requests for them to be removed were systematically ignored by the site until she posed as a lawyer and threatened legal action¹⁴.

Some defenders of the pornography industry will argue the idea that porn sites cannot monitor everything which is uploaded to their sites, and in turn may not be fully aware that some of its content is non consensual and is a result of sex trafficking. However, in recent years there have been multiple cases where pornography sites have been held to the fire, with claims of publishing content, known to be from sex trafficking organisations. In December 2020, Pornhub's parent company MindGeek were sued for \$52 million, along with a slew of accusations from 40 anonymous women claiming that they knowingly profited off a sex trafficking

¹¹ Vivienne Rachmansky. 2023. The Terrifying Connection Between Porn and Sex Trafficking. The Millenium Phoenix. Available at: <https://mhsphoenix.com/1368/op-ed/the-terrifying-connection-between-porn-and-sex-trafficking/> [Accessed 17 January 2025].

¹² Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106–386, Section 102(a), 114 Stat. 1464. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-106hr3244enr/pdf/BILLS-106hr3244enr.pdf>

¹³ www.iwf.org.uk. (n.d.). Online Child Sexual Abuse Reports Analysis | IWF 2023 Annual Report. [online] Available at: <https://www.iwf.org.uk/annual-report-2023/trends-and-data/reports-analysis/>.

¹⁴ Farr, T (2020). This petition is right, the online porn industry needs to recognise the role it plays in hosting sex trafficking content. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/pornhub-trafficking-exploitation-change-petition-sex-work-decriminalisation-a9369616.html>. [Accessed 22 July 2024].

operation by content partners Girls Do Porn, whose owners have been charged with offenses in the United States district court for the Southern District of California¹⁵.

'Girls do Porn' was a sex trafficking operation whereby women as young as 18 had been coerced into performing sexual acts on camera with the false understanding about where it would be distributed and reassured victims that the videos would not be uploaded online. However, the video's ended up on the Girls do Porn website as well as Pornhub, even after the allegations of coercion and abuse had come to light about Girls do Porn's content. Ruben Andre Garcia, an adult film performer and producer pled guilty and was sentenced to 20-years in prison for conspiring with the owners of the adult websites GirlsDoPorn (GDP) and GirlsDoToys (GDT) to recruit young women to appear in sex videos for adult websites using force, fraud, and coercion. Garcia operated between 2013-2017, targeting women between the ages of 18-20, under the false pretences that they were recruiting clothed models. It was only after the women responded to the adverts, that Garcia and his co-dependent Michael Pratt disclosed that they were looking for women to participate in their pornographic videos¹⁶. In December 2021, after a long legal battle between the victims and the site 'Girls do Porn', The US Department of Justice has ruled that rights to videos and images produced by the now-defunct sites belong to the women. A momentous win for the more than 400 victims, who can demand for the removal of the exploitative online footage, leaving no choice but for Pornhub and Google to abide by¹⁷.

Another recent large-scale case of a criminal scheme involving the use of human trafficking to create pornographic content is the 'French Bakkuke' case, named after a production and distribution site run by Pascal Ollitrault¹⁸. On July 17th, 2023, the office of the Paris prosecutor handed out its indictment after an investigation was carried out by the Gendarmes of the Paris Investigation unit. The case concerns about fifty victims of pornographic producers and actors who have been charged with aggravated human trafficking. These young women, most of whom were vulnerable and financially in need, were enticed using a fake female identity's social media account, operated by Ollitrault's, (otherwise known as Pascal OP), accomplice Mathieu L, to befriend and recruit to act in X-rated films involving violent and humiliating practices, sometimes after being drugged.

¹⁵ BBC News (2020) Pornhub sued by 40 girls do porn sex trafficking victims, BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-55333403> (Accessed: 10 June 2024).

¹⁶ Twenty-Year Sentence in GirlsDoPorn Sex Trafficking Conspiracy. (2021). [online] Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/twenty-year-sentence-girlsdoporn-sex-trafficking-conspiracy> [Accessed 7 Oct. 2024].

¹⁷ BBC News (2021) GirlsDoPorn victims win rights to their videos. BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-59699234>. [Accessed 7 October 2024].

¹⁸ Kulczyk, P (2023). Human Trafficking in Pornography: Europe Must Open Its Eyes. Available at: <https://eclj.org/geopolitics/eu/human-trafficking-in-pornography-europe-must-open-its-eyes>. [Accessed 22 July 2024].

The indictment contains thousands of texts and WhatsApp messages which were exchanged between the defendants and their other associates between 2015-2020, proving that they were both perfectly aware of the violence they were inflicting on their victims. One incriminating example of the abuse these men committed was when Julien D. sent a photo of a young woman to Mathieu L. "Crazy ...f[...]ing hot," said Mathieu L. Julien D. replied, "Very naive. If C (drugs) she'll appreciate it. The usual bullshit. And a junky, too. Contact her urgently." This is evidence that they were deliberately setting out to find vulnerable women to abuse and exploit for their own personal financial gain.

Alongside French Bukkake, Jackie & Michel, another French porn brand are also under investigation for sexual violence and modern slavery. Fifteen men who worked in the French porn industry are facing prosecution, these include porn producers and porn actors who were involved in the coercion and abuse of at least 50 abuse victims according to a source close to the investigation¹⁹. This investigation has been France's biggest ever sexual violence investigation in their history and has created a significant cultural impact with victims and advocacy groups coming together to encourage a change in the porn industry. Some have likened this movement to the 'MeToo' movement in Hollywood in 2017²⁰.

What is the UK government, local and international authorities doing to combat these issues?

In December 2023, The UK government announced a review into the UK porn industry, focusing on the harmful impacts of pornography, to tackle the abusive and exploitative practices which are rife in the industry. Lead reviewer Baroness Bertin said: "The past two decades have seen a dramatic change in the way we consume media and interact with content online. Pornography regulation now needs to reflect this change."²¹ One of the focuses of this review is to look at the links between modern slavery and the porn industry, specifically looking for ways to improve on how we can identify victims, between those who have been trafficked and coerced into working in the industry and those who are participating willingly. Furthermore, there needs to be a more accessible way for victims and whistleblowers to report abuse or exploitation within these pornography production companies. This is

¹⁹ De Foucher, L (2023) 'French Bukkake' case: Defendants tried for rape, pimping and human trafficking. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/police-and-justice/article/2023/07/20/french-bukkake-case-defendants-tried-for-rape-pimping-and-human-trafficking_6060251_105.html. [Accessed 22 July 2024].

²⁰ France 24 (2022). 'Hell behind the scenes': French Senate blasts porn industry after abuse scandal. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220930-hell-behind-the-scenes-french-senate-blasts-porn-industry-after-abuse-scandal>. [Accessed 22 July 2024].

²¹ Paul Scully and The Rt Hon Edward Argar MP (2023). Pornography review launched to ensure strongest safeguards. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pornography-review-launched-to-ensure-strongest-safeguards>. [Accessed 14 October 2024].

important to tackle as fear tactics used by senior members of these companies, in addition to human traffickers, are key to coercing people into doing what they want, making sure victims fear consequences to them or their families if they do not stay quiet.

Another focus of this review is to address how law enforcement agencies respond to human trafficking and sexual exploitation cases in the UK. This is to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their approaches in combating these types of crimes. Accessing the process can help identify what needs to be improved on to create more efficient and successful ways to better identify victims and build strong cases against traffickers and abusers which would hopefully lead to more convictions.

In addition to the review, there is a new Online Safety Act of 2023 (OSA), a UK law which sets out new regulations to deal with harmful online speech and content, which includes online pornography. The design and operation of internet services in the focus of this new law²², whereby tech companies are required to remove any illegal content, hold responsibility in addressing inappropriate material for children, and enforce age limits for adult content²³. This means content-based mechanisms such as algorithms, need to be adjusted to avoid promoting harmful or inappropriate content online. Although this law doesn't specifically focus on the issue of online pornography, the Act can be implemented to hold online platforms accountable, by their legal obligation to prevent, deter and remove illegal content. This includes content depicting, promoting or facilitating child sexual abuse, controlling or coercive behaviour, terrorism and suicide. If companies fail to comply with this new law, Ofcom has powers to enforce fines of up to £18 million, or 10% of the company's annual global turnover, whichever is greater. Additionally, there will be criminal action against companies and/or senior managers who fail to comply with requirements or fail to follow requests from Ofcom²⁴.

Within the local community of Sussex, there is a push to combat human sex trafficking, with local council and police leaders across Sussex marking the occasion of Anti-Slavery Day on Saturday 18 October 2025, by signing up to a joint pledge to stop all forms of slavery, human trafficking and exploitation. This is alongside a "pledge to become a slavery free community in Sussex", by local organisations led by Sussex Police, West and East Sussex County Councils, and Brighton and Hove City Council.

The Pledge states.

²² McGlynn, C., Woods, L. and Antoniou, A., 2024. Pornography, the Online Safety Act 2023 and the need for further reform. *Journal of Media Law*, pp.1-29.

²³ Internet Watch Foundation. 2023. The Online Safety Act Explained. Available at: <https://www.iwf.org.uk/policy-work/the-online-safety-act-explained/>. [Accessed 11 November 2024].

²⁴ Ofcom. 2023. Ofcom's approach to implementing the Online Safety Act. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/roadmap-to-regulation/>. [Accessed 11 November 2024].

“As leaders across Sussex we commit to doing everything in our power to make our county free of modern slavery. We will work proactively with national and local government, law enforcement agencies, businesses, the voluntary and community sector, faith bodies and our local communities to:

- Demonstrate strong local leadership for anti-slavery initiatives.
- Raise awareness amongst our staff, associates and the people we serve daily.
- Train our staff to recognise and respond appropriately to potential signs of slavery.
- Share intelligence and information to help detect slavery and ensure it cannot take root.
- Support victims and survivors in our communities.
- Remove slave-based labour from our supply chains.
- Contribute to building a prosperous and slavery-free local economy.”²⁵

The pledge, which was signed in October 2020, may have already created a positive impact within Sussex. Over the year between October 2020 to October 2021, Sussex Police recorded 195 crimes of Modern Slavery, including trafficking, a reduction of nearly a third from the previous year. However, as established earlier, the Coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on the recording of crime, especially crimes which can be pushed underground, such as sexual slavery. Therefore, some would argue comparing crime statistics from a year before a pandemic, with the year, which was at the height of the pandemic, cannot accurately represent the impact of the pledge on crime, and needs more time to create a more accurate picture. Additionally, In the last 12 months, there were also 141 referrals into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) of modern slavery or trafficking reported to have taken place in Sussex. The NRM is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support. This is positive as it means victims within Sussex are being reached and are being given the support needed.²⁶

Despite the struggles on tackling sex trafficking, there is still a hunger to combat these trafficking organisations globally. However, with the growing demand of sexual content and services online, increasing since the pandemic, sex trafficking experts have concluded not only do they need to investigate preventative measures to intercept victim recruitment to the sex trade, but to also tackle the high demand for

²⁵ The Newsroom. 2020. Council leaders commit to eradicating slavery and exploitation. Available at: <https://news.eastsussex.gov.uk/2020/10/16/council-leaders-commit-to-eradicating-slavery-and-exploitation/>. [Accessed 11 November 2024].

²⁶ Brighton and Hove City Council. 2021. Working together to tackle modern slavery. <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2021/working-together-tackle-modern-slavery>. [Accessed 11 November 2024].

the content provided by sex trafficking by consumers. Diane Martin, a survivor of sex trafficking, and now the Vice President of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council argues “In the same way that markets can grow, they can also be reduced, and evidence shows traffickers favour operating in countries where demand is not tackled”. Like any other business, if there is a greater consumer demand for a product or service, the more products and services businesses will provide. Therefore, implementing measures which aim to reduce demand, will in turn create less business opportunity for sex traffickers. In a meeting held in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in May 2022, Diane Martin discussed with fellow sex trafficking experts the ways in which would be most appropriate to address the demand, these include investments into education, whereby raising awareness of the dangers of sex trafficking on victims, and how consuming pornography or using sexual services makes you complicit in the exploitation and abuse of victims. Additionally, Martin also suggests criminalizing the purchase of sexual services provided by sex trafficking victims. This will force consumers to think about using the services from a moral perspective instead of putting their head in the sand and ignoring the issue completely.

Another tool used in an attempt to combat traffickers is ‘criminal profiling’, also known as ‘criminal investigative analysis’ or ‘criminal intelligence analysis’²⁷. This tactic is used by police, law enforcement and border security in an attempt to identify and intercept traffickers and their victims at the point of entry into or exit from a country. This method is managed through a behavioural and investigative approach, analysing the characteristics, behaviours and traits of previous offenders to help identify new potential traffickers who are operating. In the UK, there is an alarming number of traffickers and victims coming from Eastern European countries such as Albania, Romania and Belarus, amongst others. Therefore, UK law enforcement have to actively seek out potential victims by investigating and asking certain questions such as: What is the relationship between a man and a woman who arrive in the UK from these hot spots?; How long are they planning to be in the UK, is this a holiday?; What is the purpose of the visit? Are they planning on working in the UK? All these questions allow law enforcement officers to have a better understanding of their purpose in the UK, in addition to giving them time to assess the situation and come to a decision as to whether they might be suspected traffickers/victims or not.

What funds are out there to support victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation and combat these issues?

The Human Trafficking Foundation and The Salvation Army are charities operating in the UK which work to support victims of human trafficking and sexual slavery. They

²⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2008. 016 Workshop: Profiling the Traffickers. The Vienna Forum to fight Human Trafficking 13-15 February 2008, Austria Center Vienna Background Paper. P.2.

both provide an emergency fund which gives out small one-off grants to those who need financial support, outside of what they are entitled to by the government. These grants allow for the transition from exploitation to living independently easier for survivors. This financial help can go towards a deposit for a home, clothing, appliances for an accommodation, essential technology or training needed for job hunting, maternity and baby appliances or any other essentials survivors would need to integrate back into society²⁸. To receive this Survivors fund you have to apply through an online application through their respective websites.

In October 2024, the UK government announced a £4 million fund to address irregular migration, human trafficking and smuggling and to provide support to vulnerable communities. This money will go towards the UN's Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MMPTF), which was launched in 2019 to help implement the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The MMPTF so far has funded 24 programmes globally, 16 in partnership with UN organisations. This new funding aims to reduce the need for dangerous journeys to other countries, including the UK. The government manifesto also has a commitment to secure UK borders, protect vulnerable people who may be victimised and to combat criminal gangs, including those who traffic humans for sexual exploitation, including pornography.

This announcement marks the latest step in delivering on the government's manifesto commitments to smash criminal gangs, secure UK borders, and protect the vulnerable. It complements wider work the government is undertaking to reduce irregular migration and smash the criminal gangs responsible, including by creating a new Border Security Command, which will coordinate the work of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to tackle organised immigration crime.

The impact of Onlyfans

Launched in 2016 by British pornographer Tim Stokely, Onlyfans became the brand-new, controversial subscription-based social media platform, which is used to upload original, explicit content to their subscribers. A new avenue for online pornography for the modern era, where both amateur and professional sex workers can use the platform to promote and profit from their nudity or sex work. The app is mostly centred around the promotion of women's content, however, most users on the app who subscribe to these female content creators, are men²⁹, thereby you could argue the platform largely caters to the male gaze.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a significant rise in users on the Onlyfans site. Since the lockdowns, the number of Onlyfans users jumped from 20

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²⁹ Cılızoğlu, M.D., 2024. Online Sex Work of Women on OnlyFans: Oppression or Empowerment?. Kadın/Woman 2000, 25(1), pp.39-56.

million to more than 120 million³⁰. This is likely due to the rise of job unemployment and bored users who went online due to the restrictions enforced for many in the outside world. Additionally, many out of work entertainers resorted to online platforms such as Onlyfans in an attempt to continue providing content, whether it be fitness, music or the stereotypical explicit content. Furthermore, the rise in Onlyfans allowed people to promote their work to a wider audience, and profit from users who engaged with the content.

Although some users have turned their content into a significant profit, with some members earning up to a staggering \$1 Million dollars per month, Onlyfans, like many pornographic websites before them, can be used for illegal activity, such as human trafficking and sexual slavery. Onlyfans in the past have been very defensive around the subject of human trafficking and argues that it has very robust procedures to prevent forced sexual slavery, trafficking and child pornography, using strict age limitations on user accounts, and allowing the only payment method to be through MasterCard, which introduced new policies in April 2021, in an aim to combat criminal content on the popular site. These policies include the need for banks to certify that the seller of adult content has effective controls in place to monitor, block and remove illegal content. Additionally, Mastercard also required the pornography websites to document the age and identity of anyone depicted in or uploading the content³¹. Despite the attempt to combat sex trafficking content on this website, reports made after these policies were implemented, suggest there is still a significant link to child pornography and sexual trafficking of adult women in the content uploaded to the site. One research collaboration, conducted between Joseph Scaramucci, a Human Trafficking Detective, and The Avery Center for Research and Services analysed a sample of 97 public Instagram accounts of OnlyFans “creators” for indicators of trafficking. Thirty-six percent of these accounts were classified as “likely third-party controlled.”³²

A well-known case relating to this issue is the controversial social media stars Andrew and Tristan Tate, who were charged with rape, human trafficking and organised crime charges in Romania in 2023. Media personalities who are best known for their divisive opinions on masculinity, gender roles and women, have said some eyebrow raising commentary on female victims of sexual assault. During the rise of the ‘Metoo’ movement in 2017, which focused on raising awareness of sexual

³⁰ Alice Hancock, Patricia Nilsson. 2021. OnlyFans feels the lockdown love as transactions hit £1.7bn. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/6d4562f8-166f-4a89-a3cb-db97123a6cf0>. [Accessed 25 November 2024].

³¹ Lina Nealon. 2022. OnlyFans: A paradise for pimps and predators. Available at: <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/onlyfans-a-paradise-for-pimps-and-predators/>. [Accessed 25 November 2024].

³² NCOSE. 2024. Why We Can't Ignore OnlyFans During Human Trafficking Prevention Month. Available at: <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/why-we-cant-ignore-onlyfans-during-human-trafficking-prevention-month/>. [Accessed 25 November 2024].

assault and harassment in the workplace, in light of Harvey Weinstein's slew of sexual assault allegations, Andrew Tate tweeted "if you put yourself in a position to be raped, you must bare some responsibility. I'm not saying it's OK you got raped³³."

Additionally, the brothers have been open about their webcam businesses, according to Andrew, "My job was to meet a girl, go on a few dates, sleep with her, test if she's quality, get her to fall in love with me to where she'd do anything I say and then get her on webcam so we could become rich together³⁴." Although neither have been convicted of the crimes yet, the news that they were accused was not the most shocking, due to their blasé admissions surrounding how they view and treat women, the idea that their actions have crossed the line into criminal activity did not surprise the critics of the Tate brothers. In relation to Onlyfans, Andrew and Tristan Tate have been accused of using the platform as an outlet to force women to create explicit content for their own financial gain, according to recent Romanian court filings³⁵. With their own admittance of emotionally coercing young women to think they are in love with them, this is a familiar tactic used in human trafficking gangs to trap their victims and force them to participate in sex work and slave labour. This has been coined as "lover-boying", a preying technique which the Tates have been accused of using on vulnerable women and underage girls³⁶.

An additional criticism around Onlyfans, is the paywall feature, a hurdle many investigators who examine child sexual abuse on Onlyfans face. The director of forensic consultants at Magnet Forensics Inc, a Canada-based company that supplies law enforcement agencies with tools to search for child sexual abuse material, Trey Armick says "It's not just one paywall. It's a paywall for each and every contributor."³⁷ This means that it is hard to accurately verify the exact data needed from OnlyFans and means we must heavily rely on the statistics that come directly from OnlyFans, who provide the only publicly available record on issues of child abuse and sex trafficking on their website. This is incredibly problematic as it relies on Onlyfans to be able to investigate and self-regulate themselves. This could lead

³³ Emma Kelly. 2017. Big Brother's Andrew Tate says women should 'bear responsibility' for being raped in vile tweets. Available at: <https://metro.co.uk/2017/10/19/big-brothers-andrew-tate-says-women-should-bear-responsibility-for-being-raped-in-vile-tweets-7011756/>. [Accessed 18 December 2024].

³⁴ Nia Dalton. 2023. Everything Andrew Tate has said about women and how he became a 'self-made trillionaire'. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/everything-andrew-tate-said-women-30930249>. [Accessed 18 December 2024].

³⁵ Anna Mcguire. 2024. If these paywalls could talk. Available at: <https://cease.org.uk/if-these-paywalls-could-talk/>. [Accessed 18 December 2024].

³⁶ Sarah Rainsford. 2024. Andrew Tate put under house arrest as new charges emerge. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clvglgy8j3eo>. [Accessed 18 December 2024].

³⁷ Linda So, Andrew R.C. Marshall and Jason Szep. 2024. Millions of paywalls impede scrutiny of OnlyFans. Available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/millions-of-paywalls-impede-scrutiny-of-onlyfans/82467285>. [Accessed 09 January 2025].

to abuse of these powers, such as ignoring or burying data which doesn't reflect positively on how they want their organisation to be portrayed. Critics of the website argue that this creates an environment where harmful content can proliferate unrestricted.

Profiling of human trafficking gangs and how they operate

To fully combat the issues of sex trafficking, there must be a focus on trying to understand motivations behind how people become traffickers, what the structure of the organisation is, and the organisational strategies traffickers use to operate their activities and to control not only their victims, but to keep traffickers in line³⁸. In 1997, John Salt and Jeremy Stein pioneered the study of human trafficking as an international business, focusing on developing an analytical model of their operations and the systematic hierarchy of actors involved in the organisation³⁹, influenced by the three consecutive stages of mobilization (i.e. recruitment in the country of origin); en route activities; and insertion into the country of choice⁴⁰.

In 2000, Salt cited evidence that these human trafficking structures are headed by leadership which oversees the operations, the routes and the security into different territories. Salt discovered that many of these 'leadership brains' are 'Mafia' bosses of the countries the route runs through. The involvement of Mafia organisations such as the Italian Mafias, the Russian, Albanian and Nigerian crime syndicates, the Chinese triads and the Japanese Yakuza have been cited by many other researchers investigating the structures of organised human trafficking. Due to the size of these large criminal organisations, they have an immense influence over governments, hold many international connections and have a sizable number of actors to work in their operations, which results in difficulty in trying to dismantle the organisation and combat human trafficking and sexual slavery by local authorities.

In the United Kingdom, the Albanian Mafia are responsible for many brothels operating in London, as well as a big share of the women being trafficked from Eastern Europe, mainly from Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria. This is usually through coercive means, such as love bombing their victims, and portraying themselves as boyfriends and fiancées of the targeted women, who move over to the UK under the presumption that they are looking for 'honest work'. When they arrive, the women are then forced into prostitution and pornography⁴¹.

³⁸ Barrick, K., Sharkey, T. C., Maass, K. L., Song, Y., & Martin, L. (2024). Expanding Our Understanding of Traffickers and Their Operations: A Review of the Literature and Path Forward. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(3), 2348-2362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231210937>

³⁹ Salt, J. and Stein, J. (1997), *Migration as a Business: The Case of Trafficking*. *International Migration*, 35: 467-494. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00023>.

⁴⁰ Campana, P., 2016. The structure of human trafficking: Lifting the bonnet on a Nigerian transnational network. *British Journal of Criminology*, 56(1), pp.68-86.

⁴¹ Pérez, Ó.M. 2020. Albanian Mafia in Western Europe [online]. P. 10.

Traffickers are also specialists in logistics who can move people long distances through indirect routes which deliberately avoid border checks and policed roads in order for the trafficking of humans to go undetected. They use a number of safe houses along the way, often residing in places such as Eastern Europe and Turkey. To avoid potential obstacles, human trafficking organisations need a more militant approach, similar to drug trafficking operations, though not as large in scale. A majority of studies into the the routes of human trafficking indicate that human trafficking to the UK uses most means of transportation, including boat; train; lorry; bus; van; car; on foot; as well as by air (and in combination). If arriving by air, traffickers will often use low-cost airlines, particularly those serving Southern and Eastern Europe, and will arrive at smaller airports to avoid the increased surveillance operations of major UK airports⁴² such as Heathrow or Gatwick, furthermore, the less congested an airport is with fellow passengers, the less likely to attract attention⁴³.

Conclusion

Throughout this research there has been a definite case to suggest there is an undeniable link between sex trafficking and the pornography industry. However, this work suggests that the current research on this link is just the tip of the iceberg. With new, up and coming social media platforms and online websites such as Onlyfans, the issue may grow even greater within the near future, when we grasp the full extent of how Onlyfans is used as a tool for human traffickers, who use and exploit vulnerable women and children. Furthermore, the likelihood of new websites and social media platforms emerging in the future, with more sophisticated technological advances to hide from police and law enforcement detection could create barriers in law enforcement attempts to combat human trafficking organisations operating within pornographic websites, making it harder to identify victims and perpetrators.

Another alarming issue which has been spotlighted in this research is the number of cases which involve underage children. This calls attention to the seriousness of the pornography industry, and how it is incredibly exploitative and undoubtedly verges on criminal activity. With the understanding of International Law, placing underage children in pornographic content immediately constitutes 'sex trafficking'. This is very important to acknowledge, when looking into this subject as it emphasises the seriousness of these cases and allows the law to prosecute offenders who enable underage children in the pornography industry to the full extent of the law, disallowing excuses of how they gave their 'consent' to be involved. This tackles a 'grey area', within the pornography industry, as older teens who at the age of 16-17 could get involved in pornography, as it is normal for teenagers of that age to have

⁴² Beddoe, C. (2007) Missing Out: A study of child trafficking in the North-West, North-East and West Midlands. UK: ECPAT.

⁴³ Webb, S. and Burrows, J. (2009) Organised immigration crime: a post-conviction study, Home Office Research Report 15. London: Home Office. Retrieved from: <<http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/horr15c.pdf>. [Accessed 27 January 2025].

financial responsibilities, go to work, and have better understanding and relationship to sex as the legal age of consent in the UK is 16. This means that a 16–17-year-old can legally have sex but this law relating to pornography, whereby you have to be 18 to participate, has been implemented to protect teenagers from being exploited so early on in their sexual awakening. Additionally, it protects more vulnerable teenagers who may not have developed the emotional maturity to be exposed to sex to this extreme and to put themselves in such an exploitative position, where they can be easily manipulated and exposed to very serious dangers.

The areas of improvement that need to be highlighted to combat these issues is greater awareness of the harms of pornography, and how the consumers enable, and unintentionally encourage pornography filmmakers to use human traffickers to find their 'stars'. For example, if pornographic content which seems to involve significantly younger individuals in the production, attracts lots of viewership and business, filmmakers are going to produce even more content involving younger pornographic actors, leading to a greater number of minors being targeted, trafficked and exploited. Perhaps, with more informed education around pornography, consumers will think twice about supporting the adult film industry when they are aware of the exploitation and abuse which occurs to make these productions.

These needs to be addressed at the top, by the government first and foremost. Creating well informed, fully financed research on these links, and how best to combat the issue through policy, legislation and advocacy, in addition to supporting charities and organizations which are already attempting to combat these issues, whether it be locally, nationally or internationally. Additionally, working with law enforcement to develop new ways in which they can combat hurdles such as paywalls, and monitor sites such as Onlyfans.