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# Bound and Intertwined: The Link between Pornography and Human Trafficking – Part 1

By Bill Woolf

The human trafficking of children is a topic which continues to garner much attention in the United States. The prevalence of the issue and the negative, life-altering effects the crime has on its victims are often highlighted in the public arena. However, there has not been much discussion on the causal factors that have allowed the trafficking of persons to explode at the rate it has. According to the Department of Justice, human trafficking has become the second largest criminal enterprise in the world and is continuing to grow at an exponential rate.<sup>1</sup> Traffickers are targeting increasingly younger victims, with the most common age that children are entering the commercial sex industry being 14 to 16 years old.<sup>2</sup> In understanding why trafficking is growing so rapidly, it is important to highlight the connection that trafficking has with another societal problem, one that is just as difficult to talk about as sex trafficking—pornography. Pornography has become a very controversial subject in today's culture of sex. Many will argue that pornography is an expression of free speech and some even argue that it is beneficial to women's rights and encourages healthy sexuality.<sup>3</sup> However, these are perversions of the truth and a result of the distorted culture of sex that we live in today. There are many anti-pornography arguments, and many are valid. However, this article focuses strictly on the issue of how pornography is a causal factor of human trafficking with a direct link between the increased availability of online pornography and the increase in the trafficking of persons.



Pornography affects human trafficking in two significant ways. First, viewers of pornography often become consumers of sex trafficking. Second, pornography is a tool being utilized by the traffickers to desensitize and manipulate young people into commercial sex trafficking scenarios. Pornography can be likened to drug addiction. Dr. William Struthers, a neuroscientist, points out that "continued use of pornography literally erodes the prefrontal region of the brain, responsible for our

willpower."<sup>4</sup> When a person engages in self-gratification through pornography the brain releases extraneous amounts of dopamine in the brain. Eventually, over exertion of the dopamine receptors and signals cause them to fatigue wherein the consumer must increase their intake of the drug—and in this case pornography—to be able to reach the initial level of satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> This increased intake can be both quantitative, an increase in the amount they are viewing, and qualitative, an increase in the graphic and explicit nature of the content. Thus begins a downward spiral of desensitization eventually numbing the prefrontal cortex.<sup>6</sup>

Because the prefrontal cortex controls our impulses and desires, when it becomes numb, the brain has to create different neural pathways for those sexual desires. The brain reroutes them through the midbrain, a region not believed to be able to control reason or regulate behavior. At that point, the desire becomes a compulsion because the brain has essentially lost its willpower or ability to suppress emotions or unhealthy urges in a phenomenon called *hypofrontality*.<sup>7</sup> In my experience working as a detective and investigating sex crimes, these compulsions can lead men to seek out fulfillment of their fantasies through the commercial sex industry. In fact, a study revealed that 86% of those engaged in commercial sex reported that their clients showed them pornography in order to illustrate specific acts they wanted them to perform.<sup>8</sup> These acts, often violent in nature, are reported by the consumers of pornography and commercial sex as something unwilling to be fulfilled by their intimate partners, culminating in their pursuit of the sex trade.

The level of violence witnessed in these films has conditioned viewers to trivialize sexual assault and normalize paraphilic acts such as anal sex, group sex, sadomasochism, and bestiality.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Mary Ann Layden, a clinical psychologist, points out that pornography gives way to "Permission-Giving Beliefs" which are a set of beliefs that imply that their behavior is normal, acceptable, and common. Her research has shown that men who engaged in excessive pornographic viewing behaviors begin to believe that "all men use prostitutes", "sex is a commodity", "women really enjoy violent and degrading sex", "it's a job", and "prostitutes love sex and make money doing it", among other beliefs that justify the consumer engaging in the commercial sex trade.<sup>10</sup> However, in my experiences, I have never once interviewed a commercial sex worker who has said they "enjoyed" what they did.

This is not to say that everyone who watches pornography will end up engaging in commercial sex, but it certainly is a causal factor driving the demand for commercial sex. Concerningly, statistics show that one in ten men will purchase sex at some point in their lives, ensuring that there will always be a market for our exploited and trafficked youth.<sup>11</sup>

It is imperative that we understand that the harmful effects of pornography extend

beyond simply destroying relationships. These behaviors can lead to, and perpetuate the sexual exploitation of children. Pornography is not something that is limited to the private setting of someone's home or computer screen, but rather is contributing to the demoralizing crime of human trafficking, destroying the lives of so many young people.

#### Endnotes:

1. United States Department of Justice. "Human Trafficking". [www.justice.gov/usa-ri/human-trafficking](http://www.justice.gov/usa-ri/human-trafficking). Retrieved October 21, 2017.
2. Shared Hope International. "What is Sex Trafficking?" Infograph. [www.sharedhope.org/the-problem/what-is-sex-trafficking](http://www.sharedhope.org/the-problem/what-is-sex-trafficking). Retrieved October 21, 2017.
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4. William Struthers. "Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain." Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2009.
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10. Mary Ann Layden. "Testimony for U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation." November 18, 2004.
11. London School of Hygiene. "National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles". 2014.

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