Imposing restrictions on pornography: its potential impact and effectiveness in Sri Lanka

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Summary

The government of Sri Lanka recently introduced many measures to limit the accessibility and availability of pornography in the country including censorship of websites containing sexually explicit material and active prosecution of Sri Lankans who appeared on such websites. Available evidence suggests that pornographic consumption among Sri Lankan adolescents is considerable and such exposure may

influence sexual attitudes and activity including sexual aggression in youth. However the current evidence on the beneficial effects of censorship of pornography is less than convincing. The authors believe that warm, communicative parent-child relationship and open discussion about sexual matters at home and at school could be more effective than restrictive measures such as censorship and punitive legislation.

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Introduction

The government of Sri Lanka recently introduced many measures to limit the accessibility and availability of pornography in the country including censorship of websites containing sexually explicit material and active prosecution of Sri Lankans who appeared on such websites (1, 2). Sri Lanka has seen an exponential increase in internet usage in recent years. Latest data suggest that there are over 1.7 million internet users in Sri Lanka, 8.3% of the total population, including many children (3). With the growth of information technology, authorities have argued it is necessary to take steps to limit access to pornographic material to reduce sexual violence, safeguard children and uphold social values (1,2).

Many Western countries have adopted policies that encourage self-regulation in the internet industry and end-user voluntary use of filtering technologies that reduce access to pornography. In contrast, governments of more conservative societies such as those in China and in the Middle East have mandated comprehensive blocking of access to content deemed unsuitable for users.

Pornography on the internet is part of a plethora of pornographic material in paper and electronic formats that are widely consumed in conservative South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka. We review selected literature related to the issue in the context of the recent decisions of the government of Sri Lanka.

Discussion

Public opinion and scientific evidence on the value of limiting pornography is divided. Conservative groups argue that pornography corrupts the mind, resulting in a destabilisation of the moral and religious fabric of society. Liberals believe that consumption of such material should be left to individual discretion, at least in mentally competent adults (4).

Scientific data implicating pornography as a causal factor in violent sexual crimes remains equivocal (5). Many studies including the widely cited Commission of Obscenity and Pornography in the United States and the Williams Committee of Obscenity and Film Censorship in the United Kingdom concluded that there was no evidence of a causal relationship between pornography and rape (6, 7, 8). However subsequent studies have found that exposure to sexually violent and degrading pornographic material increases the likelihood of aggression towards women including unlawful acts of sexual violence (9, 10). Therefore it has been proposed that the assumption of a lack of a causal relationship to rape and other acts of sexual violence be confined to non-degrading and non-violent pornographic material (11). Violent pornography is believed to increase sexual callousness, lead to greater likelihood of having violent sexual fantasies and greater acceptance of rape-myths such as 'women enjoy rape' thereby increasing the tendency to commit sexual crimes (10). However it has also been argued that this association is only apparent in individuals with pre-existing aggressive and antisocial tendencies (12).

Scientific literature relating to pornography and children is not as extensive as the data on adults and pornography (13). Children's exposure to sexually explicit material has been described as a 'normal' experience which is related to age-appropriate curiosity about sex (14, 15). It has also been shown that exposure to pornography is gender related in children and adults with a definite pattern of male dominance (13, 16, 17).

On-line pornography has become the commonest source of pornography for children and adolescents in developed countries, a study done in Sweden reporting that as much as 98% of male children and adolescents had been exposed to sexually explicit material (17). Easy access, affordability and acceptability of online pornography and perceived anonymity of its consumption are identified as possible factors for this phenomenon (18, 19).

A considerable number of adolescents were reported to be consuming sexually explicit material repeatedly and such frequent users were found to be viewing all forms of pornography including deviant and extreme forms such as violent pornography, animal pornography and child pornography (20). A separate survey found that frequent exposure to pornography increases sexual callousness in children and adolescents (21). Repeated exposure not only has significant effect on sexual attitudes but also on sexual behaviour (13, 16). It was reported that earlier sexual debut, buying or selling sex, perpetration of penetrative sexual abuse, heightened sexual desire and higher acceptance of sexual harassment were common features among the frequent users of pornography (22). It is noteworthy that a high rate of pornography use alone did not predict sexual aggression in adolescents, but frequent users with other risk factors and antisocial characteristics were significantly more likely to engage in sexual aggression than non-users or seldom-users of pornography (23). This suggests that the effect of sexually explicit material on children's attitudes and behaviours at least partly depend on the personal characteristics of such children, a feature which has been replicated in several studies. Conversely, young persons with repeated intentional exposure to pornography were significantly more likely to engage in delinquency, use substances and report physical and sexual victimisation (14).

Exposure to pornography in youth has been linked with attitudinal changes such as negative views of women, acceptance of deviant or aggressive sexual behaviour, changes in sexual practices including early sexual experimentation and sexual assault (14, 22, 23). Some studies have reported clear and consistent negative effects following exposure to pornography; however, other studies have concluded that the link is weak (5, 23). While it has been suggested that such attitudinal change may lead to increased sex crime rates among youth due to adolescents modeling their actions on what they have experienced in pornography, Diamond pointed out that countries with liberal anti-obscenity laws showed a marked increase in pornography usage but also a decrease in sexual crimes, more so where young persons were perpetrators or victims (24).

Surveys done in more traditional cultures reported greater negative effects of pornography when compared to the studies conducted in more liberal societies (20, 25). Youth raised in families where sex is not a permissible subject for open discussion and those who had less education about sexuality appear to be more vulnerable to the negative influences of pornography (14, 26-29).

A warm and communicative parent-child relationship in general has been found to be more important than communicating about specific sexual topics in mitigating the negative effects of pornography including sexual risk taking (14, 27, 29). Furthermore, the satisfactory mental wellbeing of children was found to be a protective factor against the negative effects of pornography use (14). Adolescents with a high rate of pornography use were also more likely to display features of depression than non-users (14). This may be due to the compulsive use of sexually explicit material

in order to deal with feelings of discomfort or emotional distress (18, 30).

Since most of these studies have been conducted in liberal, western societies the findings and recommendations should not be generalised as it is reasonable to assume that the effects of sexually explicit material are best interpreted in their cultural context.

There are only a few studies conducted in Sri Lanka with regard to the consumption of pornography by Sri Lankan youth. A study done on Sri Lankan students in the 18 to 19 year age group found that 51% of males and 2% of females have been exposed to pornography and that such exposure reportedly had an effect on their sexual behaviour (31). The figure reported by females was considerably lower than those observed in Western studies. However, a survey conducted by Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health reported that 29% of school children over the age of 15 years watched pornographic movies frequently (32).

A Sri Lankan study done utilising focus groups reported most parents being of the view that providing information on television about sexual matters was unacceptable as they believed this would tempt children to engage in premature sexual activity (33). A cross-sectional survey of a sample of 3,134 Sri Lankan students found that 82.3% of female students and 84.9% of male students supported sex education programs in schools. Among students who opposed sex education in schools, 35% believed that sex education at school would lead to an early sexual debut (34).

Conclusion

Available evidence suggests that pornographic consumption among Sri Lankan adolescents is considerable and such exposure may influence sexual attitudes and activity including sexual aggression in youth. However the current evidence on the beneficial effects of censorship of pornography is less than convincing. The efficacy of such measures is further limited by the absence of reliable methods of censorship and the availability of a wide variety of alternative pornographic material. The authors believe the promotion of strategies found to be effective in counterbalancing the effects of young people being exposed to sexually explicit material such as a warm, communicative parent-child relationship and open discussion about sexual matters at home and at school could be more effective than restrictive measures such as censorship and punitive legislation.

Declaration of interest

None

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