

If the government is serious about protecting women and girls, it should substitute toothless internet parental control policies for the expansion of meaningful sex-education.

This week David Cameron announced a new plan to limit access to internet pornography – internet users will be required to opt in or out of being able to view pornographic content with their ISPs. [Amanda Conroy](#) writes that while this new policy may not rate high on the impact meter, it reveals much about the discourses surrounding sex and society.



This week David Cameron unveiled [a plan to help parents limit children's access to internet pornography](#) and other inappropriate online content. Sky, BT, Talk Talk, and Virgin – Britain's four biggest internet service providers – will require new customers to choose between a connection with parental controls and one without. The policy is just one of those developed in consultation with the Mother's Union – a Christian charity which has been an active campaigner for the increased protection of children from sexual imagery. Earlier this year they [released a six-month independent review](#) commissioned by the government into the commercialisation and sexualisation of children. In it they called on businesses and media to “play their part in ending the drift towards an increasingly sexualised ‘wallpaper’ that surrounds children” by signing the British Retail Consortium's guidelines for age-appropriate marketing in order to avoid the marketing of “sexy” clothing to young children.

Since the new regulations will only apply to those taking out new contracts ([a number likely to remain low](#) as there are only 10 million people without internet access and very low turnover amongst those who already have contracts), the new policy actually affects very few and, even then, only mildly. [One ISP source](#) said that, while new customers will have to choose to enable parental controls or not, neither option will be the default.

This doesn't mean, however, that there are no grounds for concern in regards to Cameron's announcement on Tuesday. Downing Street's new policies may not rate high on the policy impact meter but they reveal much about the discourses surrounding sex and society. In particular, they are just further evidence that the needs and interests of women and girls are still not being integrated meaningfully into policy or public political dialogue.

Lower access to sex education may encourage 'risky' behaviour

One of the major impetuses for shielding children from pornography is the fear that they will be inspired to engage in risky behaviour themselves. Despite the proliferation of pornography world-wide, a 2006 report on sexual behaviour based on data from 59 countries found no evidence for a universal trend towards earlier sexual intercourse. There is, however, significant evidence for a connection between access to sex education and lower rates of “risky” behaviour. Dutch children begin their sex-positive sex education at age 4 and have the lowest teenage pregnancy rates in the EU. The US, on the other hand, has [the highest rate of teenage pregnancy](#) in the OECD and 1 out of 4 American teenage girls has an STD.

Access to adequate sex education is a gendered political problem. While the Conservative MP's female-abstinence sex education recommendations are certainly not woman-friendly, Nadine Dorries is right that [girls pay the price for unplanned pregnancies](#):

it is girls who lose their education, girls that go on benefits, girls who usually throw in the towel and spend a lifetime on benefits, girls who enter old age in poverty, girls who usually end up with a row of guesting fathers and more babies because they can't get back into education.

Sites which offer advice on 'safe-sex' and contraception are one of the things that can be blocked by the ISP filtering services, says a TalkTalk representative. A combination of public zeitgeist, spending cuts for educational services (especially [those targeted at local schools and school-age children](#)), and new technologies to control access to information could have potentially disastrous effects, and ones which disproportionately affect women and girls. This is of particular concern in light of new statistics showing that [the number of young people in the UK having unprotected sex has risen](#). 43 per cent of sexually active teenagers report having sex without using contraception as opposed to 36 per cent in 2009. Certain girls,

namely those disadvantaged by race and class, are more likely to be those adversely affected.

Action for child protection, but no mention of porn's potential damage to women

What is, perhaps, even more interesting is that this, the most enthusiastic action on pornography by the Government, has been narrated as having been inspired by the necessity of child protection, with no mention of other potentially damaging effects of pornography on women. I do not wish to use this space to advocate for the censorship of pornography but, rather, to indicate that the means by which the Government is pursuing its brand of anti-pornographic action belies an ignorance of and disregard for the myriad ways in which our “sexualised wallpaper” affects women and girls.

This may seem like an odd statement considering the fact that much of the discourse advocating the de-sexualisation of childhood actually centres on ‘threats’ to girls. For example, the “sexy” clothes that are of concern are those marketed to girls, a fact which comes through in the recommendations in the British Retail Consortium’s guidelines:

Childrenswear needs to meet a wide range of uses, from play to school to party or beach clothing. The use will often determine the choices of styling, fabric/material, construction and even colour range. There may also be different concerns according to the age of the child for whom it is intended – for example, leggings may have few age-related design issues whereas dress necklines may vary to some degree between pre-school children and those just pre-teen.

For garments such as trousers and leggings a single design may be appropriate for all sizes up to 12 years. Some styles may need adjustment to ensure the fit is appropriate for the intended age, for example, younger and older versions of the same dress style may need a different neckline.

Colour ranges should be appropriate to the age range and garment: for example, black should not be used for first bras or underwear but may be highly practical for trousers for nearly all ages, and required for school uniforms.

Similarly, much of the discourse surrounding sex education centres on the threat of sex to girls. “Girls are taught to have safe sex, but not how to say no to a boyfriend who insists on sexual relations”, [Dorries laments](#), recounting how she sits in classrooms listening to girls who “do not even think they have the option of saying no to boys”. In both cases, girls and women are interpellated as hapless victims of male urges and male sexual aggression is naturalised.

Women too frequently pay the higher price of harassment, coercive sexual relations and rape

The ways boys are sexualised through exposure to pornography or sexualised products of commercial society, and the ways this impacts on future relationships with women, rarely enters into the political calculus of public policy. For many boys, [initial exposure to pornography is a means to satisfy curiosity](#), a “rehearsal for the real thing”. “The problem with pornography” says David Morgan, a psychologist/psychiatrist and specialist in sexuality and violence, “begins when instead of being a temporary stop on the way to full sexual relations; it becomes a full-time place of residence”. Boys may learn to use sexual stimulus instrumentally to fulfil their own desires and then apply this same logic with later relations with their peers. [As Edward Marriott has illustrated](#), men – and their relationships, self-esteem, and happiness – can suffer from the effects of porn.

Meanwhile, women too frequently pay the higher price of harassment, coercive sexual relations and rape. If the Government were serious about protecting women and girls, it would substitute toothless parental control policies for the expansion of sex-education that gives young boys and girls easy access to the information they need to navigate through our “sexualised wallpaper” in healthy ways and includes discussions of the role of emotions, power, respect and self-esteem in sexual relationships.