

MONTREAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN JOINS PROTEST AT PORNHUB (MINDGEEK) HEADQUARTERS AND DEMANDS ACCOUNTABILITY

by Linda Monteiro, MCW Editor and Member

On International Women's Day, on March 8 from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm in Montreal, a demonstration took place outside of the world headquarters of Mindgeek, the company that owns Pornhub, calling for the site to be shut down due to allegations the company is aiding sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children.

Protesters gathered that day to denounce Pornhub's unethical practices. Although the size of the protest was modest, its presence was nonetheless meaningful due to the media coverage it generated and hopefully the discussions that will continue to ensue. Women and children's advocacy groups, activists and concerned citizens which included a significant number of men stood outside with signs that read "Rape Hub," "Trafficking Hub" and "Shut It Down."

Megan Walker, director of the London Abused Women's Shelter denounced Pornhub's role in the normalization of degrading acts against women and its impact on the rise of violence against women as she sees first-hand in shelters. Senator Julie Miville-Dechêne called for the government to take action against the proliferation of juvenile pornography. Women's groups such as La Sortie, Defend Dignity and Montreal Council of Women (MCW) offered a few words to the press on the very real issues of sexual exploitation of minors and women as result of online pornography.

In the last few months, there have been several shocking cases of sex trafficking and child rape films that were hosted on Pornhub. A 15-year-old girl who had been missing for a year was finally found after her mother was tipped off that her daughter was being featured in videos on the site — 58 such videos of her rape and sexual abuse were discovered on Pornhub. An online petition named "Trafficking Hub" has gathered nearly 500,000 signatures as of March 15. You can sign and share your support at the following link: <https://traffickinghub.com/>

Now that you have read the facts of the event, as an MCW member, I would like to share my thoughts on this porn pandemic, which is not spoken about enough and strives and festers thanks to this complicit silence. We remain silent for many reasons: sexual conservatism, embarrassment, for consuming porn ourselves (like most people) and overall detachment over an insidious beast that garners over 43 billion visits a year.

That morning, as protesters yelled "shut it down" to motorists off Décarie, I was conflicted in repeating the words. Demanding the shutdown of the biggest porn website struck me as not only impossible but harmfully naïve and could threaten all credibility to the issue. Case in point, the next day as I went through the press coverage, I found online comments calling protesters frigid prudes, completely disregarding the matter because of - as is often the case - extreme and puritan ideology, which I would like to reframe. The issue is not about shutting down porn altogether or taking away sex workers' prerogative or people's right to sexual expression. It is about how technology-pumped porn has changed pornographic content into something that needs some sort of regulation. Pornhub allows uploads of any video, including rape and underage porn, which once online, even after being flagged and removed, can be slightly modified, duplicated and shared ad infinitum. Pornhub also allows users to do this without any ID verification. Of course, people would prefer anonymity when it comes to sharing nonconsensual pornographic materials.

I also noticed the anonymity in the limited likes, comments and shares on my social media posts about the protest – even my holiday pictures had more attention. My friends were surprised I attended such a protest, being a "modern woman," how could I stand for banning pornography altogether? What about the legitimate sex workers that make a living off porn? Well, I was glad they asked so we could discuss the issue without clutching our pearls or simply shrugging it off as what society wants behind closed doors. Because according to TraffickingHub.com, what society wants is "underage pornography, featuring girls with braces, pigtails, flat chests, no makeup, extremely young faces, holding teddy bears and licking lollipops being

violently penetrated." This begs the question, is that what we want to condone as a society? It is time we have an opinion about this because by not speaking out, we become complicit to the damage those videos inflict on society.

Pornhub did not speak either following the protest. It is, however, jumping on a PR stunt during the Covid-19 confinement, offering free premium memberships. Online memes showed statistics of the growing consumption of Pornhub since social distancing and a hypothesized a link to a potential baby boom - apparently, screens all over the world can get pregnant. In this light, Pornhub portrays itself as a hero, freeing people from boredom with hours on end of toilet paper-cleaning fun. Well, let me be the one to shed another light: the possible parallel between the widespread availability of violent porn and an increase in domestic violence during home confinement. I also would like to remind you that Pornhub, a Canadian company, doesn't care if minors spend hours watching their free content on their website, that's great traffic for them. MindGeek could easily require credit card or ID verification to restrict access to adults but chooses not to engage in bad business. As a teacher, I'll be the one to tell you that kids as young as 2nd grade have made references to Pornhub in class. Blaming it on the parents is a cope-out. At-risk youth coming from poor social and economic backgrounds are especially vulnerable to the addictive grips of online porn, as they are prone to spending a lot of time alone without parental supervision. Sooner or later, that consumption can have lasting effects on young viewers' mental health and their relationships. Netflix charges for online subscriptions, why can't Pornhub do the same? It will probably benefit sex workers in process. Regulation to online porn has become the socially responsible thing to do.

Finally, I want you to talk about the parallels between the proliferation of porn and the intensification of rape, sexual assault, sex trafficking, child trafficking, revenge porn, domestic violence, feminicide, pimps recruiting at your local high school, the rise of STIs, "stealthings," INCELS, mental health, etc.

Celebrate IWD every day by not shutting down. Speak out against the intolerable. Keep this conversation alive, pornography can be ethical and Pornhub can adapt its model, and show accountability.

Show your support at <https://traffickinghub.com/>

