

The bedroom has become a dangerous space

News report

Baroness Bertin is demanding action on porn

Dr Catherine White believes sexual choking can cause real harm

Lina Ghazal says children can access shocking material online

THE RISKY RISE OF SEXUAL STRANGULATION

AS STUDIES SHOW NON-CONSENSUAL STRANGULATION IS INCREASING, WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PROTECT WOMEN?

When Lucy Johnson* flirted with her boss Aaron* at the London bar she worked in, she had no idea it would end in violence. Lucy, 29, says, 'I looked forward to seeing Aaron every shift, and then we started to go out and socialise in a group when we weren't behind the bar. He didn't live far from me and we'd often have drinks at each other's places. He always made me laugh and we'd have a good flirt. 'We'd kissed a few times and then

one night at his place, we ended up in bed together. We started having sex, but then suddenly, with no warning, Aaron put both his hands around my neck and was leaning down on me heavily. I couldn't take in air, shout, or move him off me. I furiously slammed my hand on the mattress, like tapping out in judo. I felt utterly powerless. There was nothing I could do. Then he stopped and rolled off me. In my stunned state, I realised he was trying to strangle me in a sexual way, but he hadn't asked for

my permission. He fell asleep and I left. I was upset, but the shock made me brush it off. It scares me to think how it could have ended.'

DANGERS

Horribly, what Lucy went through isn't unusual. A recent survey from the Institute For Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) found strangling during sex is most common for those in the 16 to 34 age group, with 35% of respondents reporting that they'd been strangled by a partner during consensual sex – but in addition, 17% of people said they hadn't consented. 'Porn has a big role to play in the increased popularity of choking,' explains Annabelle Knight, sex and relationships expert at Lovehoney. 'This can have a particularly

negative impact on young people, and recent trends indicate that its consumption among youth is increasing.'

Being strangled, whether consensually or not, has a number of health risks, which if severe enough, can lead to a stroke or even death. Medical Director for IFAS, Professor Catherine White, explains, 'Your neck has a number of structures within – your arteries, veins, nerves and windpipe – and is an area very vulnerable to trauma. Strangulation causes a reduction in the circulation of blood, therefore depriving your brain of oxygen. Often people say they experience a "euphoric" feeling during strangulation, but that feeling is your brain cells being

damaged – and you can't regenerate new ones. If strangulation happens frequently, you're putting yourself at risk of nerve damage, stroke and even death.'

'PORNOGRAPHY FUELS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN'

ONLINE EXPOSURE

In February this year, the Government released its independent review on pornography, led by Baroness Bertin, which found, 'Online pornography can impact people's health and mental wellbeing, and is potentially fuelling violence against women and girls offline'. The review proposed

outlawing 'degrading, violent and misogynistic content', including making it illegal to post and possess pornography showing women being choked during sex.

Lina Ghazal, head of regulatory and public affairs at Verifymy, says, 'This report draws a clear line between the rise of extreme adult content online and increasingly damaging attitudes and behaviours. Choking, aggression and degradation are widely available online and I think that's what's really shocking. For too long, harmful pornography has been allowed to proliferate online, skewing perceptions of what is considered "normal" sexual activity, so the proposed ban is welcome.'

Latest research from Ofcom shows the average age that children first see online porn is 13, though 27% come across it by age 11. Lina says, 'Consuming this content at a young age can lead to them forming warped and often violent views of sex and encourage dangerous practices like choking. Age assurance technology has a key role to play.' Following Ofcom's new guidelines, in July, adult sites were made to impose effective age verification methods like email-based age estimation or ID checks to keep underage users away from inappropriate material.

For Lucy, what happened is something she's still struggling to come to terms with. She says, 'Aaron strangled me so hard that I had bruises around my neck, and I could see the finger marks. It took a week for them to fade. On my next shift with him, he commented on the bruises, but I brushed over it. I left the job soon after.'

She adds, 'I have a friend who enjoys choking, so I figured it was just a preference thing and maybe I was being a prude. Now, looking back, I wish I'd said it wasn't OK and that he should check before doing anything like that. But in the moment, you don't really process what's going on. I don't think it was malicious, but he behaved as if it was a normal thing to do, when it really isn't without consent.'

'Even now, I don't like to think about it. But I believe it's important to talk about as women need to understand their boundaries and communicate them to men.' ■

To find out more about IFAS, visit ifas.org.uk. For more information about Verifymy, visit verifymy.io

WORDS: DANIELLE LETT AND MEL FALLOWFIELD. PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK. NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED