



# WORKSHEET

## EXPLORING AND RECLAIMING SEXUALITY IN THE ONLINE WORLD

### Activity 3

Excerpts of interviews with Richa Kaul Padte,  
author of *Cybersex: Rethinking pornography*<sup>103</sup>

One of the transformative capacities of the internet lies in its ability to enable human connections. Finding people to develop intimacies with has been deeply valuable to people living in isolated pockets of society. And for people living in places where conversations about sexuality are missing — or worse, where a range of sexualities are stigmatized or criminalized — the connectivity of the internet has been lifesaving. The sexuality that drove people into cyberspace was deeply personal, passionate, and intimate. And contrary to popular perceptions of “seedy” internet desire, this is still the type of sexuality that is driving people online today.

The internet has not created sexual desire; sexuality, at its core, has remained the same throughout the ages. People have always felt all types of desire. What the internet has done, however, is make desire more visible, accessible, and tangible. And through its participatory nature, the internet has also allowed people to forge sexual connections, shape sexual community, and change the landscape of what sex looks like.

But for many people, the question is: if the internet has made sexuality accessible to larger numbers of people, has it also done the same for sexual violence? As the world becomes further embedded in digital technologies, we are also seeing

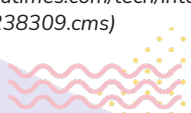
new forms of sexual violence being perpetrated against children, women, and minorities. From digital stalking to online sexual harassment, from “revenge porn” to rape videos, the concern is that instead of allowing for sexual freedoms, the internet is giving birth to sexual violence.

But the reality is that digital technology has not created new structures of control over marginalized bodies and lives. Instead, it has simply presented new avenues for existing hierarchies to operate. What was once “only” rape is now a rape video and blackmail. What might have once taken the form of a jilted lover stalking you across a college campus is now Facebook stalking, maybe with some revenge porn thrown into the mix.

Those who face sexual oppression offline are the primary targets for sexual violence online. But this violence is not created by technology; it is created by inequality. And that, perhaps, is where the internet is truly allowing people to move towards greater sexual freedom: in its potential to foster equality. Studies across the world directly link internet access to the empowerment of girls, women, and a range of other minorities. And this includes sexual empowerment, too.

What I think needs to be at the heart of this debate is consent. This is especially important

<sup>103</sup> Interview to Eszter Kismödi, Chief Executive of Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters (SRHM) and article “How the internet helped break sexual taboos, especially for women” at the Economic Times (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/how-the-net-helped-break-sexual-taboos-especially-for-women/articleshow/64238309.cms>)





when you move to the online world because what happens is that now with technology, you need to have consent at three levels: at the level of the sex, at the level of the filming and also at the level of the sharing and the uploading. Just because you have consent at one of these levels doesn't mean that you have consent at all of them. That's obviously how all consent works.

Going forward, and as my final message, I really think that we need to have pleasure, agency, and desire at the hearts of these conversations. Because yes, the situation is very difficult, and it is particularly difficult for women and sexual minorities, but we just can't tell people to pull back. We are online. We are watching porn. We are expressing our bodies, our desires and our sexualities on the internet. This is the world that we live in today. I think that if we start from a place of pleasure, rather than a place of fear, that is how we will build a more equal and feminist world, both online and offline.

#### Questions to discuss in your group

- How can the internet provide space for breaking sexual taboos and for exploring one's sexuality? What opportunities are presented online?
- The article mentions how conversations about sexuality are missing or how a range of sexualities are stigmatized or criminalized. How does the internet contribute to a person reclaiming their sexuality and using a sex positive approach in how they express it?
- What does personal agency or having a sense of agency mean? How does agency relate to a sex positive approach to sexuality? How does agency help develop positive and pleasurable sexual/romantic connections online?
- Why are all these concepts (agency, pleasure, sex positive) important in the way we explore and express our sexuality?
- According to this interview, does the internet

enhance sexual violence or not?

- Does the author believe that young people need to shy away from exploring their sexuality online?
- How can young people ensure that they have safe and pleasurable interactions online? What, according to the author, needs to lie at the hearts of this conversation?
- Having read the above interview excerpt, what is your personal opinion? Is cyberspace encouraging positive aspects of sexuality or negatives ones?