

ISSUE



Is Pornography Harmful to Women?

YES: Elizabeth Cramer et al., from “Violent Pornography and Abuse of Women: Theory to Practice,” *Violence and Victims* (vol. 13, no. 4, 1998)

NO: Nadine Strossen, from “The Perils of Pornophobia,” *The Humanist* (May/June 1995)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Researchers Elizabeth Cramer et al. state that their study of abused women shows that the use of pornography by males is directly linked with the physical and sexual abuse of women.

NO: Professor of law Nadine Strossen argues that misguided assaults on pornography have resulted in the naive belief that pornography is a major weapon that men use to degrade and dominate women.

Although the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects freedom of speech, Americans have always had restraints on what they can say and write in public. Over 70 years ago, Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes rules that the First Amendment does not give someone the right to shout “Fire!” in a crowded theater because of the harm such as act could cause. This court ruling supports the efforts of some anti-pornography feminists, who contend that the violence and degrading portrayals of women found in pornography can lead to the abuse of women in real life. Feminists Andrea Dworkin and Katherine MacKinnon call for banning not only “traditional” pornography but also publications, acts, and verbalizations that can be construed as offensive and demeaning to women. Dworkin and MacKinnon define pornography as the major weapon in a cultural war between females and males that permeates every aspect of American lives and society.

At the root of the debate is how we define pornography. Feminist Pat Califia points out that some feminists, as well as the organization Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM), have adopted a very broad definition. Califia states that according to their definition, “Pornography can include a picture of a woman whose body is smeared with honey, a woman stabbing a man in the back, or a woman dressed in leather towering over two

men, as well as films showing various sex acts. This vague definition allowed them to support their contention that pornography objectifies and demeans women, since any image that is objectifying and demeaning is called pornographic." This definition also allows some to maintain that they are fighting against sexist stereotypes of women and not trying to censor sexually explicit material. In their view, misogyny (the hatred of women) is more prevalent and pernicious in pornography than in any other type of media.

Some counter that the focus and efforts of those who oppose pornography are an example of elitist white females worrying about themselves and their "sensitivities" while they ignore the very real physical violence that inner-city residents, women and men alike, face daily. Instead of trying to work out an agreement on what is pornographic, some maintain that the focus should be on gaining greater political and economic equality for women.

As you read the selections, try to develop a classification of different types of pornography. How should the new feminist-produced soft-core pornography, some of which appears in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, that portrays women as persons who enjoy sexual pleasure as much as men do be viewed? How should pornography produced by gays and lesbians for gay and lesbian readers be viewed? What about erotic romantic novels? Decide which types you might want to make illegal, if any. Do you believe society would benefit from restricting or banning some types of sexually explicit material? For instance, should soft-core pornography, which involves nudity and genital depictions, be treated the same as hard-core pornography, which involves graphic presentation of sexual play, intercourse, and oral sex? What about pornography that includes anal sex, light and/or heavy bondage, bestiality, or other fetishistic behavior? What about topless dancers at bars, strippers on stage or at parties, or live sex acts on stage? How should suggestive advertisements, telephone sex, or "sex.alt" talk groups on the Internet be viewed?

You may also want to think about what role pornography plays in American society. Why does so much pornography depict violent sex, and the degradation and victimization of women? Is pornography a symptom of a psychologically unhealthy society, or a healthy safety valve in a society that is basically uncomfortable with sexuality? If we were more accepting and had a positive view of sex that allowed it a natural place in our daily lives, would hard-core pornography continue to sell as well as it does today?

In the following selections, Elizabeth Cramer et al. present the results of a study to demonstrate the correlation between the abuse of women and the use of pornography by the abuser. Nadine Strossen argues that the condemnation of pornography can be carried too far and that universal censorship is not the solution to end violence against women.

Elizabeth Cramer et al.



Violent Pornography and Abuse of Women: Theory to Practice

The charge has been made that pornography is the theory and rape is the practice (Kramarae & Treechler, 1985). The final report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986), also known as the Meese Commission, stated that there was indeed a connection between persons' use of violent pornography and their use of violence in intimate relationships. The Meese Commission defined pornography as "material predominantly sexually specific and intended for the purpose of sexual arousal" (p. 228-29). They further divided pornography into two subcategories: (1) erotica, which features nudity and explicit consensual sex, and (2) pornography, which contains both nonviolent materials depicting domination and humiliation, and sexually explicit material containing violence. Only the latter category was used to define pornography in the present study. Degrading and violent sexual materials have been identified as potentially the most damaging of all types of erotica to the formation of egalitarian, mutually satisfying relationships (Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988).

Theory to Practice

Does the theory of pornography (that using pornographic materials actually teaches the user that women are there for the gratification of men, and that women enjoy the sexual "liberation" that violence brings) become the practice of pornography? Social learning theory states that we learn about how to act in social situations by observing society around us (Bandura, 1977). Cowan, Lee, Levy, and Smyer (1988) did a content analysis of 45 adult only, x-rated films randomly selected from a list of 121 adult movie titles readily available from a family videocassette store. They found that 60% of the video time was devoted to explicit portrayals of sexual acts. Of these depictions, 78% were coded as dominant and 82% as exploitive, with men doing almost 80% of the dominating/exploiting. Where women were shown as dominating/exploiting, their targets were most frequently other women. A woman's rape was shown in over half of the films, and 90% of the rapists were men. Physically aggressive acts

From Elizabeth Cramer, Judith McFarlane, Barbara Parker, Karen Soeken, Concepcion Silva, and Sally Reel, "Violent Pornography and Abuse of Women: Theory to Practice," *Violence and Victims*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1998). Copyright © 1998 by Springer Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of Springer Publishing Company. References omitted.

appeared in 73% of the movies. Status inequities were shown with the men portrayed as professionals, and the women as secretaries, homemakers, students. . . . The authors state that “the message that men receive from these videos . . . is a distorted characterization of both male and female sexuality that is particularly degrading to women” (p. 309). . . .

There is also a racist component in portrayals of pornographic sex. In an examination of the covers of 60 pornographic magazines and a content analysis of 7 pornographic books, Mayall and Russell (1993) found that African American women were “portrayed in a variety of derogatory and stereotypic ways—as animalistic, incapable of self-control, sexually depraved, impulsive, unclean. . . .” Jewish women were also identified as a separate class, with these women being spoken of as “Jewish whores,” “Yiddish swine,” etc., and portrayed as submitting to, and enjoying, sexual degradation by Aryan “masters” (p. 176). . . .

Since more than 25% of all women will suffer from a sexual attack during their lifetime (Remer & Witten, 1988) and women’s enjoyment of rape is a common theme in pornography (Cowan et al., 1988; Russell et al., 1993), the question of whether viewers of pornography have callous views of rape and/or are more likely to deny men’s responsibility in cases of rape has been raised. Malamuth (1981) in a study of 271 male and female students found that exposure to sexually violent films increased men’s acceptance of both rape myths (“women say no when they mean yes,” “most women who have been raped were asking for it,” “many women secretly want to be raped”) and interpersonal violence against women. (Interestingly, women in the study were less accepting of rape myths and interpersonal violence after viewing sexually violent films.) Findings similar to these have been supported by Demare, Briere and Lips (1988), Garcia (1986), Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1988), Malamuth and Check (1985). Linz, Donnerstein and Penrod (1984) found that exposure to one film juxtaposing sexual situations and violence per day for 5 days lowered the subjects’ anxiety and depressive reactions to the violence in these films over the course of viewing. Subjects who rated the material as progressively less offensive or violent over the course of the series were also more likely to view the victim as responsible for her assault, judged her as offering less resistance to her abuser, and found her less sympathetic, less attractive and less worthy as an individual at the end of the series.

All of the studies mentioned above have taken place in a laboratory setting, and the criticism can be leveled at them that a laboratory is very different from real life. Does pornography relate to the abuse of women outside of the laboratory setting? The authors’ previous study found a correlation between battering of women and pornography use by the abuser in a more naturalistic setting (Cramer & McFarlane, 1994). In this study, 87 women pressing charges of physical abuse against an intimate partner were asked if this partner used violent pornography. Forty percent of the women reported pornography use by the abuser. Of these, 35 women (53%) stated that they had been asked or forced to enact scenes they had been shown. Thirty-six (40%) of the subjects had been raped and of these, 74% stated that their partner had used pornography. Twenty-six percent of the women had been reminded of pornography

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during the abuse incidents. Sommers and Check (1987) also found that battered women experienced significantly more sexual aggression from their partners than the nonbattered control group and that 39% of these women (vs. 3% of the controls) answered yes to the question of whether their partner had ever tried to get them to act out pornographic scenes they had viewed. Russell and colleagues (1985) stated that 14% of a random selection of 930 women from the San Francisco area reported that they had been asked to pose for pornographic pictures, and 10% had been upset by a partner trying to enact scenes from the pornography that had been seen. In a study with current and former prostitutes in the San Francisco Bay area Silbert and Pines (1993) found that 24% of 193 women who had been raped mentioned allusions to pornographic material on the part of the rapist during the assault. This figure is even more significant when it is understood that these comments were spontaneously offered by correspondents during the course of interviews soliciting information about their sexual assault experiences, with no reference to the issues of pornography being made by the interviewer. . . .

Procedures

A prospective cohort design was followed. Approximately equal numbers of African American, non-Hispanic Anglo-American, and Hispanic women, who reported abuse in the year prior to or during pregnancy, were assessed for severity of abuse and their partners use of pornography, and then assigned to an intervention or control group and followed until the baby was 12 months of age. . . .

Sample. This report is from 198 abused women of whom 35.4% ($n = 70$) are African American, 32.8% ($n = 65$) Hispanic (primarily Mexican and Mexican-American), and 31.8% ($n = 63$) are White American women. (Hispanic was defined as non-Anglo and non-African American and of Spanish speaking descent.)

The women were between the ages of 14 and 42, with a mean age of 23.2 years (standard deviation = 5.6); 29.6% were teenagers (i.e., 19 years or less). All women had incomes below the poverty level as defined using each state's criteria for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program eligibility.

Instruments

Abuse Screen

The Abuse Screen consists of five questions to determine abuse status and perpetrator within a defined period of time. (See Box). . . .

Index of Spouse Abuse (ISA)

The ISA is a 30-item, self-report scale designed to measure the severity or magnitude of physical (ISA-P) and nonphysical (ISA-NP) abuse inflicted on a woman by her male partner (Hudson & McIntosh, 1981). . . .

Danger Assessment Scale (DAS)

The DAS, consisting of 14 items with yes/no response format, is designed to assist abused women in determining their potential danger of homicide (Campbell, 1986). All items refer to risk factors that have been associated with homicides in situations involving battering. . . .

(CIRCLE YES OR NO FOR EACH QUESTION)

1. Have you **EVER** been emotionally or physically abused by your **partner or someone important to you?** YES NO
 2. **IN THE YEAR BEFORE YOU WERE PREGNANT**, were you pushed, shoved, slapped, hit, kicked or otherwise physically hurt by someone? YES NO
If YES, by whom? _____
 3. **WHILE YOU WERE PREGNANT** were you pushed, shoved, slapped, hit, kicked or otherwise physically hurt by someone? YES NO
If YES, by whom? _____
 4. **IN THE YEAR BEFORE YOU WERE PREGNANT**, did anyone force you to have sexual activities? YES NO
If YES, who? _____
 5. **WHILE YOU WERE PREGNANT** did anyone force you to have sexual activities? YES NO
If YES, who? _____
 6. Are you afraid of your partner or anyone you listed above? YES NO
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Severity of Violence Against Women Scales (SVAWS)

The SVAWS is a 46-item questionnaire designed to measure two major dimensions: behaviors which threaten physical violence and actual physical violence (Marshall, 1992). Included are nine factors or subscales that have been demonstrated valid through factor analytic techniques: Symbolic Violence and Mild, Moderate, and Serious Threats (Threats of Violence Dimension), and Mild, Minor, Moderate, Serious, and Sexual Violence (Actual Violence Dimension). . . .

Relationship Inventory

The authors designed the Relationship Inventory to assess the status of the relationship including information about the abusers' use of pornography. The following introductory comment was read by the investigators to each woman. "The next questions are about pornography and abuse. We define pornography as sexually violent scenes where a woman is being hurt. For example, the woman is held or tied down." Four questions with a yes/no response option were asked: Does the man who abuses you EVER use pornographic magazines films, or videos? Does the man who abuses you EVER show you or make you look at pornographic scenes in magazines, films or videos? Does the man who abuses you EVER ask you or force you to act out the pornographic scenes he has

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looked at? Does the man who abuses you EVER ask you or force you to pose for pornographic pictures? . . .

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this ethnically stratified cohort study of 198 abused women indicate that 40.9% of the women report use of pornographic material by the abuser with the proportion of pornographic use significantly higher for Whites compared to Blacks and Hispanics. Ethnic differences exist for all four pornographic questions, with a greater proportion of White women responding “yes” to all the pornographic questions. If one accepts social learning theory, this would tend to confirm findings of the 1970 Commission on Pornography and Obscenity which stated that White males use more pornography than other ethnic or racial groups, since most of the relationships in this study did not cross racial lines. These ethnic differences also agree with the authors’ earlier study of abuse during pregnancy that found both frequency and severity of physical abuse significantly higher for White women compared to African American and Hispanic women (McFarlane, Parker, Soeken, & Bullock, 1992).

In this study, when three groups were formed according to the abuser’s use of pornography and associated involvement of the woman in pornographic activities, violence scores were highest for women reporting the abuser asked or forced them to look at, act out or pose for pornographic scenes, pictures. Severity of violence was not related simply to whether the abuser used pornography.

. . . Stated differently, one out of four abusive men forced their partner to participate with them in their use of pornography. Using other measures of violence, this subsample of abusers was consistently the most violent.

Although some would argue that since forcing a woman to participate in a sexual act is violence, the relationship between these variables is tautological. However, the entire sample was of women currently in a relationship with a violent man and only one fourth of the women reported being forced to participate in pornographic activities. Additional research is needed to further describe the differences between these groups of abusive men.

In considering these findings, several points need to be emphasized. First, in collecting the data, we were careful to define pornography by saying “We are talking about when women are held down or hurt,” thus making sure that the women were not reporting on simple nudity. Second, the entire sample was women who had been physically or sexually assaulted by their male partner in the previous 12 months. To summarize, in this sample of 198 women, 2 out of 5 reported that their husband or male partner had used pornographic materials that depicted women in sexually violent scenes. The rate was highest for White women, followed by Hispanic women, with Black women reporting the lowest rate. Of those who did report any use of pornography, approximately 55% of the men forced the women to participate. . . .

Implications exist for both women and men. Requested or forced involvement of women in pornographic activities may indicate the likelihood for increased violence and associated trauma for women. This information can be offered to abused women as part of comprehensive counseling, advocacy, and

education. Women provided with information on behaviors associated with increased violence can make informed decisions that protect not only their own safety, but that of their children. Equally important is to provide men with information regarding the degree to which pornography may influence their behavior toward women. Of particular concern is the degree to which pornography is used by men for sexual information. Certainly, to present sexual information to both males and females with an egalitarian relationship of mutual respect will contribute to decreasing violence toward women.



Nadine Strossen



The Perils of Pornophobia

In 1992, in response to a complaint, officials at Pennsylvania State University unceremoniously removed Francisco de Goya's masterpiece, *The Nude Maja*, from a classroom wall. The complaint had not been lodged by Jesse Helms or some irate member of the Christian Coalition. Instead, the complainant was a feminist English professor who protested that the eighteenth-century painting of a recumbent nude woman made her and her female students "uncomfortable."

This was not an isolated incident. At the University of Arizona at Tucson, feminist students physically attacked a graduate student's exhibit of photographic self-portraits. Why? The artist had photographed *herself* in her *underwear*. And at the University of Michigan Law School, feminist students who had organized a conference on "Prostitution: From Academia to Activism" removed a feminist-curated art exhibition held in conjunction with the conference. Their reason? Conference speakers had complained that a composite videotape containing interviews of working prostitutes was "pornographic" and therefore unacceptable.

What is wrong with this picture? Where have they come from—these feminists who behave like religious conservatives, who censor works of art because they deal with sexual themes? Have not feminists long known that censorship is a dangerous weapon which, if permitted, would inevitably be turned against them? Certainly that was the irrefutable lesson of the early women's rights movement, when Margaret Sanger, Mary Ware Dennett, and other activists were arrested, charged with "obscenity," and prosecuted for distributing educational pamphlets about sex and birth control. Theirs was a struggle for freedom of sexual expression and full gender equality, which they understood to be mutually reinforcing.

Theirs was also a lesson well understood by the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, when writers such as Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, and Betty Dodson boldly asserted that women had the right to be free from discrimination not only in the workplace and in the classroom but in the bedroom as well. Freedom from limiting, conventional stereotypes concerning female sexuality was an essential aspect of what we then called "women's liberation." Women

From Nadine Strossen, "The Perils of Pornophobia," *The Humanist*, vol. 55, no. 3 (May/June 1995), pp. 7-9. Copyright © 1995 by Nadine Strossen. Reprinted by permission of the author.

should not be seen as victims in their sexual relations with men but as equally assertive partners, just as capable of experiencing sexual pleasure.

But it is a lesson that, alas, many feminists have now forgotten. Today, an increasingly influential feminist pro-censorship movement threatens to impair the very women's rights movement it professes to serve. Led by law professor Catharine MacKinnon and writer Andrea Dworkin, this faction of the feminist movement maintains that sexually oriented *expression*—not sex-segregated labor markets, sexist concepts of marriage and family, or pent-up rage—is the preeminent cause of discrimination and violence against women. Their solution is seemingly simple: suppress all “pornography.”

Censorship, however, is never a simple matter. First, the offense must be described. And how does one define something so infinitely variable, so deeply personal, so uniquely individualized as the image, the word, and the fantasy that cause sexual arousal? For decades, the U.S. Supreme Court has engaged in a Sisyphean struggle to craft a definition of *obscenity* that the lower courts can apply with some fairness and consistency. Their dilemma was best summed up in former Justice Potter Stewart's now famous statement: “I shall not today attempt further to define [obscenity]: and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.”

The censorious feminists are not so modest as Justice Stewart. They have fashioned an elaborate definition of *pornography* that encompasses vastly more material than does the currently recognized law of *obscenity*. As set out in their model law (which has been considered in more than a dozen jurisdictions in the United States and overseas, and which has been substantially adopted in Canada), pornography is “the sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words.” The model law lists eight different criteria that attempt to illustrate their concept of “subordination,” such as depictions in which “women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display” or “women are presented in scenarios of degradation, humiliation, injury, torture... in a context that makes these conditions sexual.” This linguistic driftnet can ensnare anything from religious imagery and documentary footage about the mass rapes in the Balkans to self-help books about women's health. Indeed, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, publisher of the now-classic book on women's health and sexuality, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, actively campaigned against the MacKinnon-Dworkin model law when it was proposed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1985, recognizing that the book's explicit text and pictures could be targeted as pornographic under the law.

Although the “MacDworkinite” approach to pornography has an intuitive appeal to many feminists, it is *itself* based on subordinating and demeaning stereotypes about women. Central to the pornophobic feminists—and to many traditional conservatives and right-wing fundamentalists, as well—is the notion that *sex* is inherently degrading to women (although not to men). Not just sexual expression but sex itself—even consensual, nonviolent sex—is an evil from which women, like children, must be protected.

MacKinnon puts it this way: “Compare victims' reports of rape with women's reports of sex. They look a lot alike... The major distinction be-

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tween intercourse (normal) and rape (abnormal) is that the normal happens so often that one cannot get anyone to see anything wrong with it.” And from Dworkin: “Intercourse remains a means or the means of physiologically making a woman inferior.” Given society’s pervasive sexism, she believes, women cannot freely consent to sexual relations with men; those who do consent are, in Dworkin’s words, “collaborators . . . experiencing pleasure in their own inferiority.”

These ideas are hardly radical. Rather, they are a reincarnation of disempowering puritanical, Victorian notions that feminists have long tried to consign to the dustbin of history: woman as sexual victim; man as voracious satyr. The MacDworkinite approach to sexual expression is a throwback to the archaic stereotypes that formed the basis for nineteenth-century laws which prohibited “vulgar” or sexually suggestive language from being used in the presence of women and girls.

In those days, women were barred from practicing law and serving as jurors lest they be exposed to such language. Such “protective” laws have historically functioned to bar women from full legal equality. Paternalism always leads to exclusion, discrimination, and the loss of freedom and autonomy. And in its most extreme form, it leads to purdah, in which women are completely shrouded from public view.



The pro-censorship feminists are not fighting alone. Although they try to distance themselves from such traditional “family-values” conservatives as Jesse Helms, Phyllis Schlafly, and Donald Wildmon, who are less interested in protecting women than in preserving male dominance, a common hatred of sexual expression and fondness for censorship unite the two camps. For example, the Indianapolis City Council adopted the MacKinnon-Dworkin model law in 1984 thanks to the hard work of former council member Beulah Coughenour, a leader of the Indiana Stop ERA movement. (Federal courts later declared the law unconstitutional.) And when Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum and Beverly LaHaye’s Concerned Women for America launched their “Enough Is Enough” anti-pornography campaign, they trumpeted the words of Andrea Dworkin in promotional materials.

This mutually reinforcing relationship does a serious disservice to the fight for women’s equality. It lends credibility to and strengthens the right wing and its anti-feminist, anti-choice, homophobic agenda. This is particularly damaging in light of the growing influence of the religious right in the Republican Party and the recent Republican sweep of both Congress and many state governments. If anyone doubts that the newly empowered GOP intends to forge ahead with anti-woman agendas, they need only read the party’s “Contract with America” which, among other things, reintroduces the recently repealed “gag rule” forbidding government-funded family-planning clinics from even discussing abortion with their patients.

The pro-censorship feminists base their efforts on the largely unexamined assumption that ridding society of pornography would reduce sexism and

violence against women. If there were any evidence that this were true, anti-censorship feminists—myself included—would be compelled at least to reexamine our opposition to censorship. But there is no such evidence to be found.

A causal connection between exposure to pornography and the commission of sexual violence has never been established. The National Research Council's Panel on Understanding and Preventing Violence concluded in a 1993 survey of laboratory studies that "demonstrated empirical links between pornography and sex crimes in general are weak or absent." Even according to another research literature survey that former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop conducted at the behest of the staunchly anti-pornography Meese Commission, only two reliable generalizations could be made about the impact of "degrading" sexual material on its viewers: it caused them to think that a variety of sexual practices was more common than they had previously believed, and to more accurately estimate the prevalence of varied sexual practices.

Correlational studies are similarly unresponsive of the pro-censorship cause. There are no consistent correlations between the availability of pornography in various communities, states and countries and their rates of sexual offenses. If anything, studies suggest an inverse relationship: a greater availability of sexually explicit material seems to correlate not with higher rates of sexual violence but, rather, with higher indices of gender equality. For example, Singapore, with its tight restrictions on pornography, has experienced a much greater increase in rape rates than has Sweden, with its liberalized obscenity laws.

There *is* mounting evidence, however, that MacDworkinite-type laws will be used against the very people they are supposed to protect—namely, women. In 1992, for example, the Canadian Supreme Court incorporated the MacKinnon-Dworkin concept of pornography into Canadian obscenity law. Since that ruling, in *Butler v. The Queen*—which MacKinnon enthusiastically hailed as "a stunning victory for women"—well over half of all feminist bookstores in Canada have had materials confiscated or detained by customs. According to the *Feminist Bookstore News*, a Canadian publication, "The *Butler* decision has been used . . . only to seize lesbian, gay, and feminist material."

Ironically but predictably, one of the victims of Canada's new law is Andrea Dworkin herself. Two of her books, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and *Women Hating*, were seized, custom officials said, because they "illegally eroticized pain and bondage." Like the MacKinnon-Dworkin model law, the *Butler* decision makes no exceptions for material that is part of a feminist critique of pornography or other feminist presentation. And this inevitably overbroad sweep is precisely why censorship is antithetical to the fight for women's rights.

The pornophobia that grips MacKinnon, Dworkin, and their followers has had further counterproductive impacts on the fight for women's rights. Censorship factionalism within the feminist movement has led to an enormously wasteful diversion of energy from the real cause of and solutions to the ongoing problems of discrimination and violence against women. Moreover, the "porn-made-me-do-it" defense, whereby convicted rapists cite MacKinnon and Dworkin in seeking to reduce their sentences, actually impedes the aggressive enforcement of criminal laws against sexual violence.

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A return to the basic principles of women's liberation would put the feminist movement back on course. We women are entitled to freedom of expression—to read, think, speak, sing, write, paint, dance, photograph, film, and fantasize as we wish. We are also entitled to our dignity, autonomy, and equality. Fortunately, we can—and will—have both.



POSTSCRIPT



Is Pornography Harmful to Women?

The issue of pornography and its potential harms, particularly in reinforcing the subjugation and humiliation of females, is a perplexing one.

Efforts to censor speech, writing, and pictorial material (including classical art) have been continuous throughout American history. The success of censorship efforts depends mainly on the dominating views in the particular era in which the efforts are being made, and on whether conservative or liberal views dominate during that period. In the conservative Victorian era, morals crusader Anthony Comstock persuaded Congress to adopt a broadly worded law banning “any book, painting, photograph, or other material design, adapted, or intended to explain human sexual functions, prevent conception, or produce abortion.” That 1873 law was in effect for a hundred years, until the U.S. Supreme Court declared its last remnants unconstitutional by allowing the sale of contraceptives to married women in 1963 and to single women in 1972.

In 1986, a pornography commission headed by then-Attorney General Edwin Meese maintained that the “totality of evidence” clearly documents the social dangers of pornography and justifies severe penalties and efforts to restrict and eliminate it. At the same time, then-Surgeon General C. Everett Koop arrived at conclusions that opposed those of the Meese commission. Koop stated that “Much research is still needed in order to demonstrate that the present knowledge [of laboratory studies] has significant real world implications for predicting [sexual] behavior.”

Suggested Readings

- K. Davies, “Voluntary Exposure to Pornography and Men’s Attitudes Toward Feminism and Rape,” *Journal of Sex Research* (1997).
- A. Leuchtag, “The Culture of Pornography,” *The Humanist* (May/June 1995).
- E. Schlosser, “The Business of Pornography,” *U.S. News & World Report* (February 10, 1997).
- N. Strossen, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women’s Rights* (Scribner, 1995).
- B. Thompson, *Soft Core: Moral Crusades Against Pornography in Britain and America* (Cassell, 1995).