

Feminism and Free Speech: Pornography is part of the ***Feminism and Free Speech*** series produced by ***Feminists for Free Expression***, a national, not-for-profit anti-censorship organization. ***FFE*** has prepared this publication to aid in the understanding of pornography, its uses and benefits, and its relation to violence. Below is an overview of the scientific and cross-cultural research, and legal and historical data on sexually explicit material. Popular beliefs are followed by research review.

1. There is no difference between obscenity and pornography.

- Yes, there is. Obscenity is sexual words and images, which are not protected by Constitutional guarantees of free speech. To be illegally obscene, a work must appeal to the prurient interest, depict sex in a patently offensive way, and lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.
- Pornography is material designed to arouse and has no legal or consistent definition. Each person's definition depends on her upbringing, sexual preferences and viewing context. One woman's "trash" may be another's treasure or boredom.

2. Sexually explicit material causes violence against women.

- No reputable research in the U.S., Europe or Asia finds a causal link between pornography and violence. Meese Commissioner Dr. Judith Becker said, "I've been working with sex offenders for 10 years and have reviewed the scientific literature and I don't think a causal link exists."
- No research, including the Surgeon General's report, finds a link between "kinky" or "degrading" images and violence. Exposure to such material does not cause people to change their sexual preferences or commit acts against their will. The derailed impulses of child abusers and rapists are caused by childhood traumas. "They are not," wrote leading researcher John Money, "borrowed from movies, books or other people."
- Studies on violent pornography are inconsistent. Some find it increases aggression in the lab, some find it does not. Research also finds that aggression

will be increased by anything that agitates a subject (that raises heart rate, adrenalin flow, etc.), not only violent movies but riding exercise bicycles. Agitation will boost whatever follows it, aggression or generosity. Dr. Suzanne Ageton, measuring violence out of the lab, found that membership in a delinquent peer group accounted for 3/4 of sexual aggression.

- Studies in the U.S., Europe and Asia find no link between the availability of sexual material and sex crimes. The only factor linked to rape rate is the number of young men living in a given area. When pornography became widely available in Europe, sexually violent crimes decreased or remained the same. Japan, with a far more violent pornography than the U.S., has 2,4 rapes per 100,000 people compared with the U.S. at 34.5 per 100,000.

3. Men watch pornography and copy it or force women to do what they see.

- Violence and intimidation existed for thousands of years before commercial pornography and countries today with no pornography, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, do not boast strong women's rights records. Men have forced women to do things—sexual and nonsexual—for centuries. The problem is not **sex**, **it's force**.
- People do not mimic what they read or view in knee-jerk fashion. If they did, the feminist books of the last 25 years would have transformed this into a perfect feminist world. If they did, advertisers could run an ad and consumers would obey. Instead, businesses spend millions of dollars and still, the strongest motive for purchases is price. People juggle words and images—good and bad—with all the others that they have seen or heard, and with all their real life experiences. It is experience that is the strongest teacher.
- Men do not learn coercion from pictures of sex. They learn it from the violence and contempt for women in their families and communities where each generation passes down what sorts of force are acceptable, even "manly".
- Copycat theories are "porn made me do it" excuses for rapists and batterers. They relieve criminals of responsibility for their acts.

4. Pornography degrades women.

Sexism, not sex, degrades women. Though sexism pervades our culture in many forms, we will not eliminate it by banning sex. Sexism and violence stem from long-standing economic, political and emotional factors. It is these that need addressing. Women interpret pornography in different ways. Some find it sexist, some find it a form of fantasy, like dreams and the movies we run in our heads when we masturbate or have sex. Opponents of sexual speech misunderstand that it is in everyone's interest to allow a variety of pleasurable materials that enhance well-being and sexual fulfillment.

- The first work removed under Canada's new obscenity standard (which claims to outlaw the degradation of women) was an erotic magazine made by and for women.

5. Pornography is only for men.

- Half the adult videos in the U.S. are bought or rented by women alone or women in couples.
- Sexual health professionals recommend pornography as entertainment and information for women and men. It may enhance failing marriages and help couples talk about and experiment with sex.
- AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases have made it a public health necessity to encourage sexual fantasy material that allows women and men safe alternatives to unhealthy sexual contact.

6. The women in pornography are exploited or victimized.

- Women are exploited and harassed in all fields; some are in pornography. Exploitation will stop when it is vigorously prosecuted everywhere it occurs.
- When the National Organization for Women considered launching a campaign against pornography, women in pornography protested, saying that a ban against it would create an illegal market of exploitation. Some said that their work gave them independence and a sense of accomplishment, banning it would worsen their lives. NOW abandoned its proposed campaign.

7. As an aid to masturbation, pornography is action that is not protected by the First Amendment.

- Pornography may lead to masturbation much as a novel or film may lead to tears or laughter. All are protected by the First Amendment. Including those that some find offensive. *"The government may not prohibit,"* wrote the Supreme Court, *"the expression of an idea because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable."*
- FFE does not believe that policing masturbation is the proper business of government or well-meaning committees.

8. Banning sexual material will protect or help women.

- Historically, censorship has hurt women. Information about sex and reproduction has been banned under the guise of "protecting" women—from the jailing or birth control advocate Margaret Sanger to the "gag rule" against abortion counseling in federally funded clinics to the attacks against feminist National Endowment for the Arts grant recipients. It has never reduced sexism or violence.
- If one group may be censored because some find it offensive, all groups may be censored, including women. The best protection for women's ideas and voices is the constitutional protection of free speech.
- Sexual images that do not meet women's needs should not be restricted. Better images should be made. The answer to bad pornography is good pornography, not no pornography.

Developed by Patti O. Britton, Ph.D., Jennifer Maguire and Beth Nathanson, M.A. Feminists for Free Expression 1993.

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Is dangerous and wrong*

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