

## A Feminist Defense of Pornography

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"Pornography benefits women, both personally and politically." This sentence opens my book *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*, and it constitutes a more extreme defense of pornography than most feminists are comfortable with. I arrived at this position after years of interviewing hundreds of sex workers.

### Feminist Positions

Feminist positions on pornography currently break down into three rough categories. The most common one - at least, in academia - is that pornography is an expression of male culture through which women are commodified and exploited. A second view, the liberal position, combines a respect for free speech with the principle "a woman's body, a woman's right" and thus produces a defense of pornography along the lines of, "I don't approve of it, but everyone has the right to consume or produce words and images." A third view - a true defense of pornography - arises from feminists who have been labeled "pro-sex" and who argue that porn has benefits for women.

Little dialogue occurs between the three positions. Anti-pornography feminists treat women who disagree as either brainwashed dupes of patriarchy or as apologists for pornographers. In the anthology *Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (1990), editor Dorchen Leidholdt claims that feminists who believe women make their own choices about pornography are spreading "a felicitous lie" (p. 131). In the same work, Sheila Jeffreys argues that "pro-sex" feminists are "eroticizing dominance and subordination." Wendy Stock accuses free speech feminists of identifying with their oppressors "much like ... concentration camp prisoners with their jailors" (p. 150). Andrea Dworkin accuses them of running a "sex protection racket" (p. 136) and maintains that no one who defends pornography can be a feminist.

The liberal feminists who are personally uncomfortable with pornography tend to be intimidated into silence. Those who continue to speak out, like American Civil Liberties Union President Nadine Strossen (*Defending Pornography*) are ignored. For example, Catharine MacKinnon has repeatedly refused to share a stage with Strossen or any woman who defends porn. "Pro-sex" feminists - many of whom are current or former sex-workers - often respond with anger, rather than arguments.

Peeling back the emotions, what are the substantive questions raised by each feminist perspective?

### Anti-porn feminism

Page Mellish of *Feminists Fighting Pornography* has declared, "There's no feminist issue that isn't rooted in the porn problem." In her book *Only Words*, MacKinnon denies that pornography consists of words and images, both of which would be protected by the First Amendment. She considers pornography - in and of itself - to be an act of sexual violence. Why is pornography viewed as both the core issue of modern feminism and an inherent act of violence? The answer lies in radical feminist ideology, which Christina Hoff Sommers calls "gender feminism."

Gender feminism looks at history and sees an uninterrupted oppression of women by men that spans cultural barriers. To them, the only feasible explanation is that men and women are separate and

antagonistic classes whose interests necessarily conflict. Male interests are expressed through and maintained by a capitalistic structure known as "patriarchy."

The root of the antagonism is so deep that it lies in male biology itself. For example, in the watershed book *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller traces the inevitability of rape back to Neanderthal times when men began to use their penises as weapons. Brownmiller writes: "From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear." How Brownmiller acquired this knowledge of prehistoric sex is not known.

Another tenet of gender oppression is that sex is a social construct. Radical feminists reject what they call "sexual essentialism" - the notion that sex is a natural force based on biology that inclines women toward natural tendencies, such as motherhood. Even deeply felt sexual preferences, such as heterosexuality, are not biological. They spring from ideology.

Men construct women's sexuality through the words and images of society, which the French philosopher Foucault called the "texts" of society. After such construction, men commercialize women's sexuality and market it back in the form of pornography. In other words, through porn man defines woman sexually - a definition that determines every aspect of her role in society. To end the oppression, patriarchy and its texts must be destroyed.

### **Liberal feminism**

Liberal feminism is a continuation of 1960s feminism that called for equality with men, who were not inherent oppressors so much as recalcitrant partners to be enlightened. Equality did not mean destroying the current system, but reforming it through such measures as affirmative action. The liberal principle "a woman's body, a woman's right" underlay arguments ranging from abortion rights to lifestyle freedoms like lesbianism. The stress was upon the act of choosing, rather than upon the content of any choice.

Liberal feminists share the general liberal bias toward free speech, but they are in flux on pornography. Some liberal organizations like Feminists for Free Expression (FFE) have consistently opposed censorship in any form. Some liberal feminists like Sallie Tisdale (*Talk Dirty to Me*) have staunchly defended sexual freedom. But many liberal feminists commonly reason as follows: "As a woman I am appalled by Playboy ... but as a writer I understand the need for free expression."

Such arguments are not pro-pornography. They are anticensorship ones based on several grounds, including: great works of art and literature would be banned; the First Amendment would be breached; political expression would be suppressed; and a creative culture requires freedom of speech.

Other liberal feminists, who have accepted many of the ideological assumptions of the anti-porn position, seem willing to sacrifice free speech for the greater good of protecting women. For example, they also condemn the free market for commercializing women as "body parts," which demeans women. In "A Capital Idea," an essay defending pornography, which sometimes seems to be an attack, Lisa Steel comments:

Sexist representation of women ... is all part of the same system that, in the service of profits, reduces society to "consumer groups." And marketing is every bit as conservative as the military ... we pay dearly for the "rights" of a few to make profits from the rest of us.

Such muddled and ambivalent "defenses" often offend the sex workers they are intended to protect.

### **Pro-sex feminism**

Over the past decade, a growing number of feminists - labeled "pro sex" - have defended a woman's choice to participate in and to consume pornography. Some of these women, such as Nina Hartley, are current or ex-sex-workers who know firsthand that posing for pornography is an uncoerced choice that can be enriching. Pro-sex feminists retain a consistent interpretation of the principle "a woman's body, a woman's right" and insist that every peaceful choice a woman makes with her own body must be accorded full legal protection, if not respect.

Pro-sex arguments sometimes seem to overlap with liberal feminist ones. For example, both express concern over who will act as censor because subjective words, such as "degrading," will be interpreted to mean whatever the censor wishes.

The statute that banned Margaret Sanger because she used the words syphilis and gonorrhea is no different, in principle, than the one that interprets obscenity today. There will be no protection even for the classics of feminism, such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which provided a generation of women with the first explicit view of their own biology. Inevitably, censorship will be used against the least popular views, against the weakest members of society ... including feminists and lesbians. When the Canadian Supreme Court decided in 1992 to protect women by restricting the importation of pornography, one of the first victims was the lesbian/gay Glad Day Bookstore, which had been on a police hit list. Among the books seized by Canadian customs were two books by Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and *Women Hating*. Such an event should not have surprised Dworkin who declared in *Take Back the Night*, "There is not a feminist alive who could possibly look to the male legal system for real protection from the systematized sadism of men" (p. 257).

On the dangers of censoring pornography, pro-sex and liberal feminists often agree. On the possible benefits of pornography to women, they part company.

### **Dissecting Anti-Porn**

Do the specific accusations hurled at pornography stand up under examination?

#### **Pornography is degrading to women.**

Degrading is a subjective term. I find commercials in which women become orgasmic over soapsuds to be tremendously degrading. The bottom line is that every woman has the right to define what is degrading and liberating for herself.

The assumed degradation is often linked to the "objectification" of women: that is, porn converts them into sexual objects. What does this mean? If taken literally, it means nothing because objects don't have sexuality; only beings do. But to say that porn portrays women as "sexual beings" makes for poor rhetoric. Usually, the term sex objects means showing women as body parts, reducing them to physical objects. What is wrong with this? Women are as much their bodies as they are their minds or souls. No one gets upset if you present women as "brains" or as spiritual beings. If I concentrated on a woman's sense of humor to the exclusion of her other characteristics, is this degrading? Why is it degrading to focus on her sexuality?

#### **Pornography leads to violence against women.**

A cause-and-effect relationship is drawn between men viewing pornography and men attacking women, especially in the form of rape. But studies and experts disagree as to whether any relationship exists between pornography and violence, between images and behavior. Even the pro-censorship Meese Commission Report admitted that the data connecting pornography to violence was unreliable.

Other studies, such as the one prepared by feminist Thelma McCormick in 1983 for the Metropolitan Toronto Task Force on Violence Against Women, find no pattern to connect porn and sex crimes. Incredibly, the Task Force suppressed the study and reassigned the project to a pro-censorship male, who returned the "correct" results. His study was published.

What of real-world feedback? In Japan, where pornography depicting graphic and brutal violence is widely available, rape is much lower per capita than in the United States, where violence in porn is severely restricted.

### **Pornography is violence because women are coerced into pornography.**

Not one of the dozens of women depicted in pornographic materials with whom I spoke reported being coerced. Not one knew of a woman who had been. Nevertheless, I do not dismiss reports of violence: every industry has its abuses. And anyone who uses force or threats to make a woman perform should be charged with kidnapping, assault, and/or rape. Any such pictures or films should be confiscated and burned because no one has the right to benefit from the proceeds of a crime.

### **Pornography is violence because women who pose for porn are so traumatized by patriarchy they cannot give real consent.**

Although women in pornography appear to be willing, anti-porn feminists know that no psychologically healthy woman would agree to the degradation of pornography. Therefore, if agreement seems to be present, it is because the women have "fallen in love with their own oppression" and must be rescued from themselves. A common characteristic of the porn actresses I have interviewed is a love of exhibitionism. Yet if such a woman declares her enjoyment in flaunting her body, anti-porn feminists claim she is not merely a unique human being who reacts from a different background or personality. She is psychologically damaged and no longer responsible for her actions. In essence, this is a denial of a woman's right to choose anything outside the narrow corridor of choices offered by political/sexual correctness. The right to choose hinges on the right to make a "wrong" choice, just as freedom of religion entails the right to be an atheist. After all, no one will prevent a woman from doing what she thinks she should do.

### **A Pro-Sex Defense**

As a "pro-sex" feminist, I contend: Pornography benefits women, both personally and politically. It provides sexual information on at least three levels:

- It gives a panoramic view of the world's sexual possibilities. This is true even of basic sexual information such as masturbation. It is not uncommon for women to reach adulthood without knowing how to give themselves pleasure.
- It allows women to "safely" experience sexual alternatives and satisfy a healthy sexual curiosity. The world is a dangerous place. By contrast, pornography can be a source of solitary enlightenment.
- It offers the emotional information that comes only from experiencing something either directly or vicariously. It provides us with a sense how it would "feel" to do something.

Pornography allows women to enjoy scenes and situations that would be anathema to them in real life. Take, for example, one of the most common fantasies reported by women - the fantasy of "being taken." The first thing to understand is that a rape fantasy does not represent a desire for the real thing. Why would a healthy woman daydream about being raped? Perhaps by losing control, she also sheds all sense of responsibility for and guilt over sex. Perhaps it is the exact opposite of the polite, gentle sex she has now. Perhaps it is flattering to imagine a particular man being so overwhelmed by her that he must have her. Perhaps she is curious. Perhaps she has some masochistic feelings that are vented through the fantasy. Is it better to bottle them up?

Pornography breaks cultural and political stereotypes, so that each woman can interpret sex for herself. Anti-feminists tell women to be ashamed of their appetites and urges. Pornography tells them to accept and enjoy them. Pornography can be good therapy. Pornography provides a sexual outlet for those who - for whatever reason - have no sexual partner. Perhaps they are away from home, recently widowed, isolated because of infirmity. Perhaps they simply choose to be alone. Couples also use pornography to enhance their relationship. Sometimes they do so on their own, watching videos and exploring their reactions together. Sometimes, the couples go to a sex therapist who advises them to use pornography as a way of opening up communication on sex. By sharing pornography, the couples are able to experience variety in their sex lives without having to commit adultery.

Pornography benefits women politically in many ways. Historically, pornography and feminism have been fellow travelers and natural allies. Although it is not possible to draw a cause-and-effect relationship between the rise of pornography and that of feminism, they both demand the same social conditions - namely, sexual freedom.

Pornography is free speech applied to the sexual realm. Freedom of speech is the ally of those who seek change: it is the enemy of those who seek to maintain control. Pornography, along with all other forms of sexual heresy, such as homosexuality, should have the same legal protection as political heresy. This protection is especially important to women, whose sexuality has been controlled by censorship through the centuries.

Viewing pornography may well have a cathartic effect on men who have violent urges toward women. If this is true, restricting pornography removes a protective barrier between women and abuse.

Legitimizing pornography would protect female sex-workers, who are stigmatized by our society. Anti-pornography feminists are actually undermining the safety of sex workers when they treat them as "indoctrinated women." Dr. Leonore Tiefer, a professor of psychology, observed in her essay "On Censorship and Women": "These women have appealed to feminists for support, not rejection. ... Sex industry workers, like all women, are striving for economic survival and a decent life, and if feminism means anything it means sisterhood and solidarity with these women."

### **The Purpose of Law**

The porn debate is underscored by two fundamentally antagonistic views of the purpose of law in society.

The first view, to which pro-sex feminists subscribe, is that law should protect choice. "A woman's body, a woman's right" applies to every peaceful activity a woman chooses to engage in. The law should come into play only when a woman initiates force or has force initiated against her. The second view, to which both conservatives and anti-porn feminists subscribe, is that law should protect virtue. It should come into play whenever there has been a breach of public morality, or a breach of "women's class interests."

This is old wine in new battles. The issue at stake in the pornography debate is nothing less than the age-old conflict between individual freedom and social control.

Wendy McElroy's books include *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography* (see review on p. 62) and *Sexual Correctness: The Gender-Feminist Attack on Women. The Reasonable Woman* is due from Prometheus Books in Spring, 1998.

**[http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy\\_17\\_4.html](http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy_17_4.html)**. Retrieved on Oct. 16, 2004.