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PORN POWER!

A feminist defense in the war on pornography

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In the ongoing war between radical feminists and the Religious Right, there is one battle in which both sides have curiously joined together. Rather than fight each other, these strange bedfellows have combined forces to combat pro-pornography feminists. Their motivations range from fear of moral bankruptcy to the halting of the objectification of women. "Repressing sexuality seems to be a hallmark of our country. Whether it's the impeachment of 'Blow Job Bill' or slapping letters of approval on movies, this nation finds it necessary to control issues of carnal knowledge," remarked Matthew Gever, a college student. Feminists have split into two factions: those who wish to censure pornography and those who do not. It seems pornography has created an irreconcilable chasm within the feminist community, pitting those who fear degradation against those who embrace liberation.

In fact, the distinctions between the feminist groups are a bit more complex. There are those feminists who feel that pornography is an expression of male culture through which women are commodified and exploited. For these anti-pornography feminists, sexual desire is coded as male and thus any material designed to arouse sexual desire is male-oriented, using women as objects.

Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon have been at the forefront of this group for decades, publishing works and campaigning to pass legislation. Nina Hartley, an actress in adult videos, responded to this argument: "Sex as a commercial venture doesn't bother me because I do not automatically view all women as victims of sex; nor do I view all men automatically to be victimizers, or all intercourse as *de facto* rape, a Dworkin/MacKinnon tenet."

Pro-pornography feminists themselves are divided. There are those feminists who may feel uneasy about the idea of pornography, but even dislike pornographic material, but feel strongly that a woman has a right to control her own body and utilize free speech. Still a third group of feminists consider themselves to be fiercely pro-pornography, arguing that pornography in and of itself can benefit women. Chelsea Drager, author of the book *Law and the Feminist Debate about Pornography* comments that anti-pornography feminists "focus on those aspects of sexuality that victimize and oppress women; liberal feminists focus on ways women could overcome sexual repression and achieve sexual liberation."

"For loving pornography I will be viewed as a woman who is so psychologically damaged by patriarchy that I have fallen in love with my own oppression," noted Wendy McElroy, author of the book *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*. "She goes on to say 'In other words, if I enjoy pornography, it is not because I am a unique human being with different perspectives. It is because I am psychologically ill.' Indeed, this is the reality as anti-pornography feminists view strippers as either trapped or brainwashed. For anti-pornography feminists, it seems inconceivable that a woman could be empowered by pornography. Andrea Dworkin, a fierce opponent of all pornography, argues that, "As long as women are viewed as sex objects which exist solely for the pleasure of men, their status – or lack of it – will continue to be determined by men."

Anti-pornography feminists contend that pornography is degrading to not only the woman involved in the production of the pornographic material, but all women everywhere as the continued consumption of pornography forces women into a sub-citizen category. "I agree that the constant bombardment of naked women objectifies women in some way," concedes Karen Gould, a pro-pornography feminist. "But to define the depiction of mutually enjoyable sex as a violation of women's civil rights? Please, stop the bandwagon; I want to get off." To blame the majority of gender inequality on pornography is to use pornography as a scapegoat. The gender inequality within our society today is the complex result of economic, historical, and societal forces. While pornography may play some role in the power struggle between the sexes, removing any trace of women's sexuality from our culture will not automatically catapult the view of 'woman as equal' to the forefront of our cultural conscious.

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commercial in which women become orgasmic over soapsuds to be tremendously degrading," remarked McElroy. "The bottom line is that every woman has the right to define what is degrading and liberating for herself." It is this very freedom that the anti-pornography feminists hope to eliminate. In an effort to 'protect' women from themselves, they strip women of all sexual powers, completely ignoring any positive experiences that result from pornography. "I got a lot out of doing sex work," noted Carol Queen, former stripper and adult actress; "It has encouraged me to learn more about my sexuality and my own issues and boundaries. It has given me an enhanced sense of attractiveness and let me get in touch with the fun of exploration." It is this process, this idea of exploration and self-discovery, which anti-pornography feminists hope to negate.

Assuming that women do not like sexually explicit material perpetuates the idea that women are anti-sexual and victims of male lust. In contrast, pro-pornography feminists feel that women can explore and affirm their sexuality through pornography.

"Pornography may be a means for women to safely experience sexual alternatives, break cultural stereotypes, and empower themselves through the assertion of sexual subjectivity," remarked Feminists for Fornication, a community based group for women who enjoy sex and pornography, "We are tired of being called sluts and anti-feminists. We believe that sexually explicit material can offer women a way to appreciate their bodies through gaining control of erotic experiences." Whether these positive experiences include exploration with a partner, overcoming inhibitions, or as a median through which to communicate, pornography serves as a means for women to be honest about their wants and desires, without necessarily being explicit.

"Pornography's greatest benefit is that it makes people talk," argues Kelly Ashmore, a pro-pornography feminist, "Sex is a taboo subject in America and discussion helps

bring our views to light. We need more discussion, not forced silence, to work toward a healthier sexuality."

All sides of the pornography debate agree that a healthier sexuality does not encompass violence towards women. Anti-pornography feminists, however, maintain that pornography leads to sexual violence against women, either by supplying individuals

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with specific ideas or feeding male aggression. In fact, there has been no concrete data to show a link between pornography and violence towards women. Interestingly, the only factor directly linked to rape rate is the number of young men living in a given area. Professor Murray Straus, whose correlational studies were used by the Meese Commission to "justify" that exposure to pornography leads to sexual assaults, wrote to the commission, "I do not believe that my research demonstrates that pornography causes rape." People simply do not have a knee-jerk reaction, mimicking what they see in movies or read in books. If this were the case, points out the Feminist Freedom of Expression group, the accumulated writings of the feminist movement over the past twenty-five years would have turned our society into a gender-equal utopia; advertisers would have to only instruct consumers to buy before they did no with abandon. In reality, advertisers spend billions of dollars trying to convince consumers to purchase their products. "People juggle words and images – good and bad – with all the others that they have seen or heard and with their real life experiences," points out Patti Britton, member of the Feminist Freedom for Expression group. Feminists need not fear that men will mindlessly repeat what they see acted out in pornography, for humans simply don't operate in this manner.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PLAYBOY MAGAZINE

Despite the lack of concrete proof, anti-pornographers maintain that pornography somehow equates sexual violence. However, the exact opposite is probably true. Pornography may serve as a catharsis for some aggressive individuals, acting out their violent fantasies while viewing pornography, as opposed to attempting to act these fantasies out in reality. For example, pornography within Japan is much more sexually explicit and openly violent than pornography in the United States. Yet Japan has only 2.5 rapes per 100,000 people, compared to the United State's rate of 34.5 rapes per 100,000 people. This would indicate that the amount of pornography somehow acts as a sexual release, diverting sexual frustrations into a 'safer' form.

Pointing to the number of sex offenders who are heavily involved with pornography, it becomes important to distinguish between a correlation and a cause and effect relationship. While sex offenders may be involved in pornography, this does not indicate that pornography is the cause of their sexually violent behavior. One should keep in mind just how many people have used passages from the Bible as justification for rape and murder, yet no one argues that the Bible somehow maintains a cause and effect relationship with homicide. In fact, trying to establish a cause and effect relationship between pornography and violence when one does not exist may actually hurt sex crime victims. "Blaming pornography [for acts of violence] diffuses responsibility away from the culprit," said Matthew Gever. Thus, the very women anti-pornography feminists are trying to protect become the most victimized of all.

The main objection of anti-pornography feminists, to censor and declare illegal all forms of pornography, is a blow to feminism everywhere. "Anti-pornography crusaders do nothing but degrade women. By pushing for legislation, these factions serve to promote the idea that women cannot make decisions for themselves and need the protection of the patriarchal state," argued Matthew Gever, a pro-pornography feminist. In fact, the very language anti-pornography feminists tend to use points to this very fact.

The Minneapolis anti-porn ordinance passed in 1983 said women in pornography were "coerced" (even if they were of age, fully consented and had signed a release) and could sue the producers and distributors. The ordinance states, "Children are incapable of consenting to engage in pornographic conduct, even absent of physical coercion and therefore require special protection. By the same token, the physical and psychological well-being of women ought to be afforded comparable protection." The ordinance places women's inability to consent on the same level as that of a child. It establishes the need for the government to hold the hand of the woman as she is not developed enough to fully understand the situation before her and make an intelligent decision to control her own body. Such a notion is ludicrous and highly offensive to all women, whichever side of the pornography debate they reside on.

Yet anti-pornography feminists continue to maintain that censorship will benefit

women. Patti Britton explains that, "Historically, censorship has hurt women. Information about sex and reproduction has been banned under the guise of 'protecting' women - from the jailing of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger to the 'gag rule' against abortion counseling in federally funded clinics to the attacks against National Endowment for the Arts recipient Holly Hughes." Yet it is this censorship,

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Pro-porn feminist Wendy McElroy

this tool which has continued to harm and repress women, that the anti-pornography feminists would like to utilize.

Rather than open themselves to a multi-layered discourse on sexuality, anti-pornography feminists would prefer to eliminate pornography all together. Never mind that almost half the adult videos in the U.S. are bought or rented by women alone or women in couples. Or that "Pornography benefits women, both personally and politically," according to Wendy McElroy. For anti-pornography feminists, sexually explicit material is viewed as so wholly male as to have no value for women. It is important, within this debate over freedom and control, to understand that the ability to choose hinges on the ability to make the wrong choice. Enma Justinia, a member of the Feminist Conspiracy, reminds us that "It is important that women's right to control her own body and destiny is honored, including the right to choose sex work." FP

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