

# *Feminists Against Censorship* *draft manifesto Oct. 1998.*

## WHAT IS CENSORSHIP?

Censorship is something that is imposed from above by those who seek to control us by limiting what we can know. In essence, it is an attempt to constrain what we think and believe. By silencing the voices of dissent, those in power hope to suppress criticism of their values, policies, and programmes.

## WHAT IS WRONG WITH CENSORSHIP?

Knowledge is power, and censorship takes that power away from ordinary people and concentrates it in the hands of the censors. Censorship harms us all.

## WHERE IS IT?

In more places than you probably think. For example, you may not know how often images and other content are removed from your television shows, your videos, and 18-rated films. You might not even be aware that information and issues that reach your daily newspaper are limited to fit into the commercial and political interests of the owners and their friends in business and government.

## WHAT KINDS OF THINGS ARE CENSORED?

Typical examples are things that express criticism or opposition to the state, to major commercial interests, and to religious or moral "authorities". This covers opposition across a broad political spectrum. Educational material is frequently suppressed.

## SO, WHY "FEMINISTS AGAINST CENSORSHIP"?

Feminists have long recognized that censorship hurts women, restricting debate that challenges the status quo and especially affecting material created by women to educate and inform about sexual matters. Sexual censorship in particular has always been popular with governments when suppressing activists who wish to confront racism and sexism.

During the 1980s, the moral right exploited women's fears about sexual violence and promoted the view that pornography was the cause of the problem and therefore censorship the solution. The government seized upon this as a means to appear to care about women's safety without spending any money. Some pro-censorship women also adopted this view, saying that all women wish to see greater censorship, and claiming that this was the only feminist position. When long-time feminists formed Feminists Against Censorship in 1989, it seemed there was no criticism of censorship left at all in the public discourse. But we brought back the more traditional feminist view and challenged the assumption that suppressing pornography would somehow protect women.

We believe that an environment where many ideas and viewpoints flourish encourages social progress, and that censorship inhibits social change. History has taught us that censorship is most often used by the powerful against those who are oppressed and struggling to be heard. Censorship is what helps preserve the status quo. As feminists, we should be speaking out against censorship, whatever form it takes.

## BUT THE DANGER STILL EXISTS.

However, despite our success, the state has continued to churn out new examples of censorship – satellite television channels and computer-generated images, non-certificated films and videos – and new police powers to invade people's homes in search of erotic materials. The government also wants to censor the Internet. And journalists have been imprisoned for "conspiracy to incite criminal damage" by reporting animal liberation actions.

#### BUT ISN'T PORNOGRAPHY HARMFUL?

No one has ever been able to demonstrate that pornography causes harm. But isn't it strange that we assume sexual imagery is dangerous? After all, it's just material that's designed to arouse people sexually, and that isn't a bad thing in itself. There is no evidence that it causes violence or makes people behave anti-socially. Even the 1990 Home Office report did not find any link between porn and rape or violence.

Of course, some people dislike porn, but that is no reason to say others can't have it. FAC believes that using porn should be an individual choice.

#### BUT ISN'T PORNOGRAPHY JUST FOR GUYS?

No. Pornography is material that is intended to sexually arouse. That's what's sold in porn shops, and that's what people are looking for when they go to porn shops.

But in the United Kingdom, the obscenity laws make it so tricky to produce highly charged erotic material that producers and distributors only feel safe showing images of women alone. Obviously, these are most likely to appeal to the tastes of heterosexual men. The largest distributor in Britain long refused to carry any picture of an aroused man or any picture showing two or more people together. So the "all-male" appearance of pornography is really an artefact of censoriousness, not something fundamental to the genre.

In recent years, women have been producing their own erotic material, and FAC welcomes this. But producing anything outside the norm is a still gamble, as you never know what's going to be prosecuted. Erotic material that challenges the mainstream traditions is the kind that's most likely to be attacked by reactionaries and by the police in particular.

#### DON'T CHILDREN NEED PROTECTING?

Yes – from ignorance. Research on sex offenders shows that sexual ignorance and repression is an important factor in their backgrounds. Sex education also helps young people protect themselves from abuse, from disease, and from unwanted pregnancy. But modern censorship has been reducing the amount of sex education available to young people.

#### BUT WHAT ABOUT "HATE SPEECH"?

Who decides what qualifies as "hate speech"? In Britain, it is illegal to incite people to *any* kind of violence, for racial or other reasons. But speech that actually encourages people to mistrust or hate their neighbours comes in many forms. We all notice it when crude words of racial hatred come from people in neo-Nazi garb, but the more refined speech of gentlemen in suits is both more insidious and more effective. And, once we have declared one word or phrase to be "racist" or "sexist", aren't we tacitly suggesting that everything else is fine?

If we try to ban certain kinds of ideas, we can never really challenge them in public debate. The real answer to bad speech is more speech.