Ask yourself... Do you really want more censorship?

Women need open and safe communication about sexual matters, including the power relations of sex. We don't need new forms of guilt parading under the banner of political correctness. We need a safe, legal working environment for sex workers, not repressive laws or an atmosphere of social stigma that empowers police and punters to brutalize them. We need sexually explicit material produced by and for women, freed from the control of moral rightists and sexist men, whether they sit on the board of directors or the board of censors. We need an analysis of violence that empowers women and protects them at the same time. We need a feminism willing to tackle issues of class and race and to deal with the variety of oppression in the world, not to reduce all oppression to pornography.

FEMINISTS AGAINST CENSORSHIP

WHAT IS PORNOGRAPHY?

Pornography is probably best defined as material that is designed to sexually arouse. The Obscene Publications Act was first introduced in Victorian times in order to prevent the "lower orders" from seeing material which might "deprave or corrupt" them, and that is still the basis of our obscenity laws today – laws which are the most restrictive in the EC.

Recently, some feminists have tried to re-define pornography as sexual materials which are harmful and degrading to women. Some of these feminists believe pornography can be separated from erotica, which they see as being based on equality and therefore acceptable, and the others believe that, as we live in a sexist society, any depiction of sexuality is harmful to women.

In our view, these distinctions are meaningless and only confuse the issue.

FEMINISTS AGAINST CENSORSHIP

Feminists Against Censorship was formed in 1989, by a group of women who had been active in the feminist movement since the late 1960s and early 1970s, in response to the growing feminist anti-pornography campaign. We now deal with a wide range of issues connected with censorship, especially sexual censorship, and have grown into a large network of women. In recent years, a number of younger women have joined us. As a group, we have campaigned against attempts to introduce further restrictions on sexually explicit material and for the abolition of the laws against pornography, as well as for greater freedom for women to see and create our own materials. As with all other media, much pornography (especially some "top-shelf") is sexist; however, censoring it won't fight sexism, but rather will suppress debate. It is much better to have everything out in the open than to force it underground – we cannot fight what we cannot see. 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 to preserve the status quo. As feminists, we should be speaking out against censorship, whatever form it takes.

FEMINISM AND PORNOGRAPHY

Until recently, anyone who had tried to follow the arguments surrounding pornography might have been surprised to find that there actually is such a thing as a feminist anti-censorship stance. Reading the newspapers or watching television could lead one to conclude that anyone who cares about women's issues and women's rights must necessarily condemn pornography. The anti-pornography lobby is a powerful and vocal one, made up of MPs of all parties (including the Labour Party), feminists, police officers, Mary Whitehouse and her supporters, right wingers and various religious groups. Strange bedfellows indeed. These groups claim to speak for women – all women – in their campaign to further censor the sexual material that we can make or see. We dispute this claim, just as we dispute the claim that women would be more free if sexual materials were suppressed. Our society is full of images of women that are offensive and exploitative, but this is hardly limited to pornography. We live in a power based, sexist world, and some pornography reflects this, just as the media, the government and religious institutions do. As feminists, we believe that the real fight is against the social, economic and educational discrimination that women suffer every day. Pornography is the wrong target – it's just about fantasy. Feminism must be willing to tackle all the misrepresentations of women in our daily life, not just those that are specifically sexual.

EVERYONE'S OFFENDED SOMETIMES

At times it may be hard to reconcile our feelings about freedom of speech and censorship with our gut reactions to some of the images that we see. However, finding an image distasteful is no argument for banning it. People are offended by many things – boxing, bridal magazines, blasphemy, swearing on TV, diet books, adverts – the list is endless. Anyhow, who would have the final say on what is offensive?

We cannot legislate against offensiveness – nor should we want to; our laws should be there to protect people from harm. Being offended, however, is not the same as being harmed. Rather, offensive materials, and the awareness of oppression, may stimulate debate.

WOMEN'S STATUS AND PORNOGRAPHY

We are told by the feminist anti-pornography lobby that pornography dehumanizes women and encourages men to see us as sexual objects, thereby helping to maintain our low status in society. Yet in Denmark, where the law is extremely liberal and hardcore pornography can be easily and legally purchased, women have about the highest status in the world: equal numbers of male and female MPs, equal pay and conditions, and a childcare system that puts this country to shame. By contrast, few feminists would argue that women in countries ruled by Islamic law, where censorship is at its most repressive and pornography is banned, enjoy even a semblance of equality. Women's status in society is defined by our legal and economic power. We should also remember that women have been abused and oppressed since the beginning of our history, whereas commercial pornography is a relatively new invention.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND PORNOGRAPHY

Much more sinister is the argument put forward by anti-pornography campaigners that pornography causes violence against women. It is said that repeated exposure to sexually explicit material can induce men to go out and commit sexual crimes. This is supposedly backed up with a great deal of "scientific evidence". Most studies do not support this claim. Indeed, the Home Office report on pornography (1990) was unable to find any link between pornography and violence. Some studies have found positive social effects from pornography. Additionally, it has been found that convicted rapists have, in general, had less access to pornography than the average male. Countries with strict censorship, such as South Africa and Iran, have some of the highest rape rates in the world. Men who commit sexual assault usually have a background of sexual repression and guilt.

Anything could trigger a violent response in some unbalanced people – many people have cited the Bible as their inspiration for violent crimes. Publicity about violent crimes (such as those committed by the Yorkshire Ripper) has sometimes been followed by "copycat" attacks by people who have seen reports of the offences in the news. We believe people will commit violent crimes whether or not they see pornography, the Bible, or the news – the causes of sexual violence are much more complex and deeply rooted in oppression and repression. We should be careful not to overestimate the influence of the media; after all, most songs are about love and yet we don't all show love to each other.

FAC would say that "porn blaming" is just another way of letting the men who commit these despicable acts off the hook, rather than making them take personal responsibility for their own behaviour. We also need to recognise that rape is the product of the misogynistic, patriarchal society that we live in, not "dirty pictures".

PORNOGRAPHY AND EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN

Anti-pornography campaigning does nothing to help sex workers, who are already stigmatized by society and often unprotected by the law. Further criminalising pornography will simply drive the industry underground, giving the women involved even less recourse to the police and the courts when they are in trouble. Like many working women in the world today, some sex workers are exploited both physically and financially. Like everyone else, they need the right to job protection and minimum pay and conditions.

SEXISM, SEXUALITY AND CENSORSHIP

Until recently, almost all pornography was aimed at men. This is not surprising when you consider that until the mid-sixties, sex was generally considered to be something for men to enjoy and for women to submit to; the function of the clitoris was virtually unknown. Information on contraception was often censored. Married women were expected to be economically dependent on their husbands. In our society things have gradually changed. In 1967 an in-depth study into female sexuality was conducted by Masters and Johnson and the late sixties saw the formation of many radical movements, including women's liberation and lesbian and gay liberation. Sexual knowledge became more widespread, and sex magazines like *Forum*, which were aimed at women as well as men, were produced and sold. In the mid-seventies, the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act came into force; the view that men were superior to women was losing ground.

Now, in the nineties, women have succeeded in having rape and domestic violence taken more seriously, and we are at last beginning to have a chance to be in charge of our own lives and sexuality. We have a long way to go, but we have also come a long way since the fifties. Now women have far more knowledge about our bodies and know far more about sex; this has come about largely because of the sexual materials available, many of which could be called pornographic. These days, in the USA, nearly 50% of pornographic

videos rented are taken out by women; in the UK, 31% of women told a recent survey in *New Woman* magazine that they and their partners enjoyed looking at pornography together. Magazines with male pin-ups, and shows like The Chippendales, clearly aimed at women, have appeared and are enormously popular. Some women have begun creating their own sexual materials. These are advances that need our support, not our censure.

The laws as they stand are frequently used against the interests of women. For example, they have been used to suppress information about contraception, safer sex and abortion. Pin-up magazines can show women posing with their legs open, but if they were to show a picture of a man with an erection they could be prosecuted. The obscenity laws are sexist. Customs and Excise regularly seize materials by women, including lesbian magazines; even *Caught Looking*, a serious book written by women about sexuality and censorship, was not allowed into the country.

"FEMINIST" ANTI-PORNOGRAPHY LEGISLATION?

The current legal position on pornography is a mess. There is wide agreement across many opposing opinions that it needs to be changed. What is not agreed is how that change should be made. Our law is based upon obscenity, and this is interpreted by the courts. Something is judged to be obscene if it is considered "likely to deprave or corrupt". Clearly, this state of affairs places control over what we can and cannot see in the hands of the (largely upper class white male) establishment. There has been a great deal of talk recently about new "feminist" anti-pornography legislation based on an analysis that defines pornography in terms of "harm and degradation" to women. Do not be fooled; who do you think will be enforcing these laws? In Canada, where laws based upon this analysis have been introduced, the first successful prosecution under them was brought against a lesbian magazine produced by and for women and, ironically, two books by Andrea Dworkin, who's analysis of pornography formed the basis of the Canadian legislation, have also been seized. These new laws have therefore been used directly to censor sexual material aimed at women and, bizarrely, an anti-pornography text written by one of the leading lights of the feminist anti-pornography movement. If similar legislation is introduced here, it will also be used against material that challenges the status quo.

SNUFF MOVIES

If there really are commercially produced pornographic films in which people are actually killed – and, despite concerted efforts by the police worldwide, no evidence of such a film has ever been found – the issue is murder, not pornography.

CHILD ABUSE

Existing law quite rightly prohibits the abuse of children. So making films, videos and photographs of such abuse is clearly already a crime.

SEX EDUCATION AND CENSORSHIP

The issues of HIV, AIDS and safer sex make it imperative that people receive clear and appropriate information about the relative health risks of different acts and behaviour in order to be able to make informed choices. All recent research shows that unprotected penetrative sex between men and women places women at significantly more risk of HIV infection than men. As such, safer sex is a vital feminist issue. Some anti-pornography campaigners claim that their target is not "educational materials" and that these would be exempt from any tightening of legislation; but who actually would decide what is educational – the Terrence Higgins Trust or the Obscene Publications Squad? Under our current legislation there have been a number of seizures and restrictions of safer sex material. Furthermore, it is meaningless to say that educational materials would not be targeted, since anti-porn campaigners differ widely on what exactly they would ban.

Winning the fight against the spread of HIV and AIDS depends on frank and open discussion about sexuality and sexual practices. An atmosphere of sexual repression, where sexual images are hidden away, engenders only misinformation, embarrassment and guilt.

FAC has produced several books and leaflets as well as holding public meetings, providing public speakers for universities and other institutions, making regular media appearances and lending our support to a variety of civil liberty and anti-censorship campaigns. If you would like to receive information about our work or support us, please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the address below.

FURTHER READING

Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol, editors,
BAD GIRLS & DIRTY PICTURES:
THE CHALLENGE TO RECLAIM FEMINISM
Pluto Press 1993

Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh,
SEX EXPOSED: SEXUALITY AND THE PORNOGRAPHY DEBATE
Virago 1992

Gillian Rodgerson and Elizabeth Wilson, editors,
PORNOGRAPHY AND FEMINISM
Lawrence and Wishart, 1991

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