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Feminists Against Censorship

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Submission to
HOME AFFAIRS INQUIRY INTO COMPUTER PORNOGRAPHY

The invitation from the Home Affairs Committee to make a submission on this subject asks: "What particular problems are caused by the use of information technology to generate or disseminate obscene (including grossly violent) material (including computer games)?"

After thorough review of the existing research on effects of pornography and violent material on the viewer, we can answer this question simply: there is no known harm caused by the actual viewing of pornographic materials, and results of aggression studies in relation to violent material have been unable to demonstrate any changes in behaviour in children after viewing such materials. As of yet, no research has indicated a causal relationship between these materials and anti-social behaviour that is said to justify censorship.*

Causes of sexual violence and abuse

Research into the background and behaviour of serious sex offenders has revealed that the causes of abusive/violent behaviour are found in early childhood and generally pre-date exposure to pornographic materials [Goldstein et al. 1973]. Some abusers have begun to use pornographic materials in order to communicate their wishes to their victims; however, the desire to abuse is a direct result of repressive and/or abusive upbringing of the eventual sex offender, and not a result of pornographic exposure. Abusers will abuse whether or not they have ever seen pornographic materials or have them available in order to facilitate their abusive acts; pornography itself is not implicated in being causal to this behaviour, anymore than the English language is the cause of abuse by offenders who use spoken English to communicate their desires.

The continuing collection of data on serious sex offenders over the last 50 years has been consistent: the offenders are those who have had highly sexually repressive backgrounds, often stemming from religious beliefs in their families that stigmatized all sexual responsiveness and expression. The most horrific crimes are generally committed by people who have suffered the most repression in early life, often coupled with violent punishment and/or sexual abuse.

There is reliable evidence that a considerable number of sexual abusers of children believe that sexual acts within the family, even with their own children, are "less of a sin" than to have an affair, masturbate, or visit a prostitute [Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program, Santa Clara, 1991]. This may be one reason why sexual abuse of children is principally a problem within the family - but it is certainly not related to pornography.

Rapists in general have been taught fairly repressive values, although these may appear to be in the normal to conservative range. Men who believe that sexually active women are "bad" are more likely to feel justified in sexually assaulting such women. These values come from the general culture and from some religious disciplines in particular, and do not in any respect emanate from pornography.

*See: The President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, US 1970; Edna Einsiedel for the Meese Commission, US 1986; The Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography and Public Health, US 1986; Sense & Censorship, Marcia Pally 1991; Pornography: Impacts & Influences, Home Office (Cumberbatch & Howitt) 1990; Soft-Core, Thompson & Annetts 1990; "Mystery & Imagination", King 1993 for detailed overviews.

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Preventing child abuse

Because most people are uncomfortable with the idea of exposing children to sexual information, and particularly because recent social panics have made many people obsessive about keeping sexual materials of any kind from children, it has been difficult to set up sex education programmes that might help children understand sexuality and therefore recognize behaviour on the part of adults that is inappropriate. However, there have been a few programmes in the United States, and these have successfully demonstrated that the best way to help children protect themselves is to arm them with the following information:

1. what male and female sexual organs are called, what they are for, their basic functions and uses, and the possible physical dangers of inappropriate and/or unsafe sex;
2. that sexual feeling is not "bad" (and neither is masturbation) and that they will eventually be able to express it in relationships with others;
3. that their sexual organs and feelings belong to themselves and that no one including their parents has the right to force sexual activity on them.

This last item is of particular interest, since it flies in the face of everything children are normally taught. It is standard that children are told from an early age that they must obey their parents in all things and that the will of a child can never overrule even the whims of the parent. It is necessary to make a special effort to make children aware that, in this case, they have every authority to say "no".

Programmes that have used this method have found that many abusive parents are stopped by the child's refusal: as long as the children do not feel they can refuse, they tend to go along with an abusive parent, and the parent can convince himself (or herself) that the child doesn't mind; but when the child refuses, the parent is often forced to acknowledge that the abuse is undesired and many parents do actually cease their abusive activities. This is not always the case, of course, but if the child has had appropriate information about the subject, she or he can recognize that what has happened is wrong and is more able to go to another adult for help. It is particularly helpful that the child now has a vocabulary to describe what has happened. The value of this can not be underestimated; current methods of leading children to describe acts they may have no understanding of or language for has caused untold damage in child abuse cases (particularly "Satanic abuse" cases) in which no abuse ever took place, but leading questions by social workers have caused the children to feel compelled to assent to what the interviewer wants to hear. This in itself can traumatize the child. It is far more difficult to mislead children who understand the facts in the first place.

Preventing the creation of rapists

Research has consistently shown that rapists hold views of women and sexuality that are repressive and misogynistic: sex, at least for women, is bad, and women who arouse sexuality in others or sexually express themselves are therefore "fair game". It is a common attitude that an unchaste woman deserves no protection and is a legitimate target. The research consistently indicates that children must be taught as early as possible that sex is not bad and can be very good for both men and women. It is necessary to make adults aware that the distinction between rape and consensual sex is vast; research has indicated that, even in adulthood, it is possible to make men aware of the falseness of rape myths and to make them less willing to accept excuses for this kind of behaviour.

Again, it should be stressed that these negative attitudes toward sexuality are far more pervasive in the general culture than they are in pornography. In

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"Respectable" society tends to take the view that women are somehow responsible for "provoking" sexual misbehaviour in men and thus "deserve" a sexually violent response; pornography does not treat causing arousal as something that should be punished by violence.

Children are particularly vulnerable to rape mythology because they are kept ignorant of sex, often kept repressed or even punished for sexual expression or curiosity, and thus it becomes far too easy for them to believe that sex is bad - so bad that it is one of the few things we do not expose them to or show on television.

It should be remembered that research in the United States has shown that the best indicator for gender inequality in an area is the number of religious fundamentalists in that area [Baron 1990]. Negative attitudes about sex lead to rape myths and negative attitudes about women, which ultimately create rapists and other serious sex criminals. Pornography is not the source of these values.

Other sexually-related violence

One of the most common and acceptable forms of violence by men against women is beating or murder of a woman because she has "strayed" or is believed to have done so by her partner. It is not unusual to hear some men - soldiers, for example - make announcements such as, "I'll kill the bitch if I find out she's been fooling around while I wasn't looking." This attitude is actually very acceptable in some parts of society, and in many cultures it is rare for men who have murdered their partners under such circumstances to be convicted.

The belief that it is reasonable for a man to kill an unchaste partner is an old one and it has never gone away. The assumption that a woman's sexuality is the exclusive property of her husband has been supported by law for centuries - most notably, the fact that until very recently it was considered a legal right for a man in England to rape his wife. It is helpful that the law seems to be changing, but we must continue to make clear in every possible way that men are not entitled to use violence to enforce faithfulness or demand sexual services from their partners. There are still too many people who try to rationalize this kind of violence.

In contrast, it should be noted that the "kill the bitch" syndrome is never present in pornography. While the dominant culture accepts the view that a man should react with violence if he finds his wife in bed with another man, the scenario in a pornographic film would be virtually the reverse. A man coming home and finding his wife with a lover would most probably disrobe and join them, either by invitation or on his own initiative, and be welcomed. This is a far cry from the assumption that violence is an appropriate response to infidelity. (This should be proof enough that the claim that pornographic values enter the culture is spurious; this value has always pertained in pornography, but has never been accepted in our culture, where violence continues to be the acceptable response.)

In addition, increasing unemployment has led to frustration and self-hatred for thousands of men who feel that their very manhood is threatened by their decreased earning power. Historically, "respectable" society has taught them that they should feel this way about being unable to support their families, but the result is that they take it out on their spouses and sometimes their children, leading to increases in domestic violence. Again, pornography is in no way implicated in this violence.

Non-sexual crime and violence

Some of the impetus for recent moves to censor sexual and violent material comes from recognition that there has been a recent upsurge in crimes related principally to theft and vandalism. A larger number of alienated young people seem to be on the prowl, causing incidents of violence to their neighbours, with

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the result that many people wish to find a culprit to blame. Pornography, horror films and video games may seem, to the ignorant, sufficiently alien to make easy targets for this blame. Additionally, the spiralling unemployment crisis has placed many more people in sufficiently marginal economic conditions that theft has begun to seem a legitimate option to joblessness. These problems are all closely tied together and are not the fault of entertainment and games media.

The urge to point the finger of blame is not surprising in an increasingly alienating environment where our futures seem to be eroding continually. What little we could once expect the authorities to deliver in return for our taxes - free health care, housing and benefits, reliable public transport, and reasonable safety - have been disappearing before our eyes, while our taxes have actually increased dramatically in the form of VAT. Unlike income taxes, VAT disproportionately hurts people in the lower economic strata, and these are of course the people who are least able to compensate for the loss of other services by going to the private sector.

The banking and real estate industries can take the blame for some of these problems, but the government has the greatest responsibility for having pursued dangerous economic policies and for promoting a morality of selfishness and greed coupled with a strong anti-social message. Not so long ago, then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made numerous public statements to the effect that there is no society, that we owe nothing to our less successful neighbours, that the pursuit of material wealth justifies even the most heartless treatment of the "losers" in the economic lottery, and that we have no responsibility for the well-being of our neighbours - nor they for ours. How must this have sounded to young men who were seeing their economic choices dwindle before them? Such statements from a society that does not care about them are not likely to make them feel responsible to that society. "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" sounds like fighting words to young men who feel that they've just had their boots taken away.

This combination of alienation and poverty, joblessness and hopelessness, is what has led to the increases in crime. The only media that encourage this are the continued appearances by government ministers explaining that yet more services "must" be decreased or discontinued. All social science supports the view that creating a sense of hopelessness and loss of future among the populace is virtually guaranteed to increase crime. Censorship in the cause of reducing crime is at best a red-herring being waved by dishonest politicians who wish to distract us from criticizing policies which have hurt our society.

Violent Material

Laboratory experiments have been unable to demonstrate that viewing violent material is a specific cause of aggression or any behavioural change [Malamuth & Geneti 1986].

The only evidence of behavioural change in adults was found at an American facility for adult males where incidents of violence declined dramatically in the jail after the introduction of violent films into the entertainment fare of the prisoners [Palm Beach, Florida, County Jail 1990].

Pornography

The word "pornography" is understood by most people to refer to sexual material. Portrayals intended to sexually arouse are all that must be present in order to define any form of material as "pornographic". Despite the hyperbole that has come out of some parts of the feminist movement in recent years, violent portrayals and degradation are neither common nor expected in pornographic works; it would be impossible to sell material as "pornography" that had no sexual content, but no one is surprised when material sold as pornography contains no

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violence - and all buyers of pornography expect to get material that has sexual, rather than violent or degrading, content.

Most dictionaries define "pornography" as writings, drawings, etc., intended to sexually arouse. This is the meaning that is understood by those who make it, those who sell it, those who buy it, and virtually all of those who campaign against it. Readings of existing and proposed laws, whether they be traditional obscenity laws or the so-called new "feminist" laws, all specify, first and foremost, the sexual nature of "pornography". It is spurious to claim that we are talking about violence and degradation when we talk about pornography; most porn does not contain this sort of material. In fact, overview research has consistently shown that pornography contains less violence than most other media.

People use pornography in order to become sexually aroused; that is its principal purpose and the use to which it is put. Unless you believe there is something wrong with being sexually aroused, there is no reason to object to pornography as it is normally used. Some people believe that masturbation is wrong; this is in fact precisely the sort of attitude that leads to the creation of sexually violent offenders, and is not a view that sane people hold. No reasonable person is willing to pay the police to pursue a programme of stopping people from masturbating.

Most claims about "violence" and "degradation of women" in pornography refer to sadomasochistic (SM) materials. It is asserted by anti-pornography activists that this material is full of "torture" and "dominance of men over women", but this is false. Most SM materials are just posing, costumery, and staged, theatrical scenarios. Indeed, most of the domination portrayed in SM materials is domination by women. It is untrue to claim that pornography portrays some special degradation of women by men. Incidentally, it should also be remembered that SM is a small sub-category of pornography and by no means representative of the whole genre; nevertheless, even were this not the case (as so many pro-censorship campaigners have claimed), it is dishonest to suggest that these fantasies lead to violence.

There is some slight justification for the claim that "top shelf" materials sold by our newsagents seem to be aimed almost exclusively at men, being pictures of women posing for men to look at. This is an artifact of our existing censorship laws and puritanical attitudes; there is stronger resistance in our society to sexual portrayals of men, both by custom and by law, and thus it is virtually impossible to portray men sexually the way we do women. The major newschains, Smith's & Menzies, will not sell materials that show people together, and thus it is difficult to portray mutuality. Erection is forbidden and pictures of men with unerect organs are less than convincing in portraying sexuality and desire in males. True pornographic movies such as are available in the rest of Europe and the English-speaking world are illegal and this makes it all the more difficult to show men or couples in sexual ways. In other words, law and custom force us to retain a "men's club" pornography market. Most of these criticisms of "pornography" would be eliminated by the repeal of the Obscene Publications Acts and the Video Recordings Control Act.

Censorship

The government has demonstrated no evidence that there is any reason to censor sexual material, although it does appear to be ignoring its own report on pornography [Home Office, Cumberbatch & Howitt 1990] and making claims about the dangers of pornography in order to justify continuing and additional censorship of such materials. It is already clear that the censorship of pornography serves no useful purpose to society; why, then, are we being asked to spend our valuable tax money on campaigns to stamp out pornographic media?

Public fears of pornography have been generated in large part by hysterical claims from police and others that "pornography" consists principally of child

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pornography and violent material. This falsehood is used to elicit support for censorship, but the public is being misled, and virtually every poll has found that when the general population are asked whether they think stills or motion pictures of adults indulging in common sex acts should be banned, they say they do not. Yet scare stories about child porn and violence are used to justify the suppression of materials that are not child porn and not violence, but merely sexually explicit. This is a fraudulent abuse of the public trust.

It appears that much of the motivation for intensified censorship can be traced to the moral campaigns of highly politicized individuals who are trying to enforce their own repressive attitudes about sex on the general population. One such individual is Michael Hames of the Obscene Publications Squad, who has been writing articles, speaking to and for political groups, and appearing on television to promote his scare stories about the evils and dangers of the "deluge of foreign filth" we are told is pouring into this country from those nasty foreigners in Europe. The bigotry of these claims should be enough to make them unpalatable to decent people, and yet our queasiness over sex seems to make us willing to accept rhetoric that would do Hitler proud.

More ominously, the continuous reiteration of the claim that this material is damaging has been remorselessly promoted with little open dissent, although decades of research completely contradict this position. Feminists Against Censorship recently made a complaint to the relevant authorities with regard to the unbalanced presentation of this view on television in the last couple of years, a copy of which we append for your information. We suggest that you read this carefully, as it makes specific criticism of the recent edition of The Cook Report on which Michael Hames once again appeared propounding his scurrilous claims about pornography, and particularly computer porn.

In summary, we repeat that there is no evidence that censorship in any way ameliorates problems in society, and that there is no legitimate reason why tax money should be devoted to this purpose. The continuing high exposure of Michael Hames and government ministers who endlessly reiterate the suggestion that males will do violence to society if they masturbate to sexual materials is itself actually harmful and likely to help breed more rapists and abusers in our community.

We therefore submit that it is vital that all anti-pornography activism by the government and its agents should cease forthwith and be replaced with an honest, positive sex education campaign geared to reach even the youngest children to protect them from sexual abuse by adults and each other, and to prevent them from being corrupted by the dangerous anti-sex propaganda which is currently being promoted by the government, the police and the media.