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Does Pornography Cause Violence?

The Search for Evidence

The conviction that pornography causes sexual violence is what motivates much of the contemporary campaigning for legislation against it – at least by feminists. In the latest British collection produced by Catherine Itzin in order to strengthen anti-pornography initiatives and legislation in the UK, we read repeatedly of the consistent and conclusive links between pornography and violence. Pornography, Itzin asserts, is 'a crucial element', causing violence against women and children and male dominance generally (Itzin, 1992, p. 412). The link here, the earlier publication by *Everywoman* had announced, 'is considerably stronger than that for cigarette smoking and cancer' (*Everywoman*, 1988, p. 5). 'I doubt that anybody disputes the data,' the psychologist Edward Donnerstein, a leading figure in pornography research, declared at public hearings in the USA in 1983, thereby hoping to help secure the implementation of new anti-pornography legislation in the state of Minneapolis, known as the Minneapolis Ordinance (*Everywoman*, 1988, p. 22). It is odd, then, that it should be Donnerstein and his fellow researchers who themselves dispute the data.

In their more scholarly writings, these psychologists indicate that whether or not their laboratory reports of links between pornography and violence tell us anything at all 'about real-world aggression, such as rape, is still a matter for considerable debate.' Indeed they even, rather disingenuously, complain now that their research has been misunderstood and misused by anti-pornographers to strengthen censorship laws (Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987, p. 174). Given the passion and anger poured into the pornography debate, however, not to mention Donnerstein's own former readiness for public testimony, this is hardly surprising. Today, at a time of ever greater alarm over the extent of men's violence against women and children – much of it sexual violence – pornography, for many, serves as its most appropriate metaphor or symbol. It is this which makes it one of the most fiercely contested moral issues of our time, conceptually and politically.

When first used in the 1860s to describe the photography of prostitutes, 'pornography' was defined as sexually explicit, and therefore obscene or

lewd words or images intended to provoke sexual excitement, but its meaning has never been fixed. Today, however, disagreements over both its definition and its significance are deeper than ever – disagreements flowing inevitably from the contrasting political positions which exist around pornography. Before we consider the psychological research on the effects of pornography, and the use made of it, some knowledge of the competing political and moral arguments which feed into the debates is therefore necessary.

Definitions and Convictions

It is now customary to identify three distinct positions on pornography: *liberal, moral right* and *feminist*. The liberal position, manifest in the North American *Presidential Commission* of 1970 or, in a more qualified way, in the British *Williams Report* of 1979, offers a non-evaluative definition of pornography, as sexually explicit material designed for sexual arousal. It argues that there is no scientific evidence for pornography causing harm in society, and therefore no sound reasons for banning or taking other forms of action against it. While pornography may offend many women and men, it brings harmless pleasure to others. The Williams Report aimed to limit the *public* display of pornography in the interests of those who might find it offensive. This position, clearly, explicitly calls upon the support of existing empirical research.

The position of the Moral Right in Britain, of Mary Whitehouse and the Festival of Light, outlined in the *Longford Report* of 1972, assumes a different definition of the pornographic, as representations of sex removed from what is believed to be its legitimate function and context: 'a symptom of preoccupation with sex which is unrelated to its purpose' (Longford, 1972, p. 205). Pornography is a threat to traditional family values because sex exists for procreation and should be confined to marriage. In line with this approach, censorship in Britain during the 1950s and early 1960s was mainly targeted at any public display of the naked body or of premarital or extramarital sex. Then as now, the Moral Right also sought to suppress information on birth control, abortion and sex education in schools, while demanding rigid censorship of any type of sexually explicit material designed for arousal and pleasure, condemning in particular 'perverse' and homosexual imagery as threatening family life and creating general social and moral decay.

This was the position which grew in strength throughout the 1980s, assisted both by sexual panics around AIDS and the increasing, though piecemeal, tightening up of censorship legislation under the Thatcher government. In these years, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1982, which provided guidelines to local councils for controlling the licensing of 'sex establishments' and their cinematic materials, replaced the Williams Report's emphasis on harm with a condemnation of material intended to stimulate 'sexual activity' or 'acts of force or restraint which are associated with sexual activity' or images which portray 'genital organs or urinary or excretory functions'. Two years later, the Video

Recordings Act went further, again with stipulations not just against violence, but against explicit sexual images of genitalia, excretory functions and acts of sex (Merck, 1992, p. 50). The Moral Right, however, has little interest in whether research offers any evidence for links between pornography and violence, believing it to be common sense that imagery or writing designed primarily for titillation is offensive and dangerous, and leads to sexual decadence and crime.

The *feminist* critique of pornography, in contrast, addresses the sexism and exploitation of women represented in mainstream pornographic material – which is frequently also racist. Pin-ups, pornography, advertising, textbooks and religious beliefs and imagery, all – with spray gun and paint – were declared 'offensive to women'. It is from *within* this position, however, that some of the most passionate battles have been waged in recent years, especially over the evidence for the 'harm' of pornography. It is widely thought that feminists have uniformly understood pornography as abusive to women and an incitement to violence against them. And certainly all feminists criticise the mythologies mediated through mainstream pornography, at least in its heterosexual versions, which represent women as passive, perpetually desiring bodies – or bits of bodies – ubiquitously available for men's insatiable sexual appetites. Produced and consumed primarily by men, standard pornography would seem to mock standard feminist attempts to express a woman-centred sexuality, liberated from male-centred discourses and practices.

But there is more than one argument about pornography within feminism from which conflicting conclusions have been drawn. In the 1970s feminists did not seek legal restrictions on pornography, or treat pornography as uniquely symbolic of male dominance. With the state and the judiciary so comprehensively controlled by men, obscenity laws were known to have always served to suppress the work, if not jail the organisers, of those fighting for women's own control of their fertility and sexuality. Objecting to all forms of sexist representation, feminists set out to subvert a whole cultural landscape which, whether in selling carpet-sweepers, collecting census information or uncovering women's crotches, placed women as the subordinate sex. Representatively, Ruth Wallsgrove, then working for *Spare Rib*, declared in 1977: 'I believe we should not agitate for more laws against pornography, but should rather stand up together and say what we feel about it, and what we feel about our own sexuality, and force men to re-examine their own attitudes to sex and women implicit in their consumption of porn' (Wallsgrove, 1977, p. 65).

This type of feminist emphasis on women's need to assert their own sexual needs and desires, however, came by the end of the 1970s to be overshadowed by, and entangled with, feminist concern with the issue of male violence. It was the popular writing of Robin Morgan and Susan Brownmiller in the USA in the mid-1970s which first made a definitive connection between pornography and male violence: 'Pornography is the Theory, Rape is the Practice' (Segal, 1987 and 1990). With male sexuality here seen as indistinguishable from male violence, with male violence

here presented as the key to male dominance, and with pornography portrayed as the symbolic proof of the connection between the two, anti-pornography campaigning was soon to become emblematic of this strand of feminism. It redefined 'pornography' once again, as material which depicts violence against women, and is in itself violence against women.

Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* remains the single most influential text proclaiming this particular feminist view of pornography, in which 'pornography' lies not only behind all forms of female oppression, but behind exploitation, murder and brutality throughout human history (Dworkin, 1981). Following through such logic to draft model feminist anti-pornography legislation – the Minneapolis Ordinance – Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon define pornography as 'the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words' (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 176). Armed with this definition, they propose that any individual should be able to use the courts to seek financial redress against the producers or distributors of sexually explicit material if they can show that it has caused them 'harm'. The question of proof of harm thus lies at the heart of feminist anti-pornography campaigning.

And yet, despite the growth and strength of the feminist anti-pornography movement during the 1980s, particularly in the United States and in Britain (where we have seen the emergence of the 'Campaign against Pornography' and a similar 'Campaign against Pornography and Censorship'), some feminists (represented in Britain by Feminists Against Censorship) passionately reject its analysis and related practice. They see it as a complete mistake to reduce the dominance of sexism and misogyny in our culture to sexuality and its representations. They believe that men's cultural contempt for and sexualisation of women long predated the growth of commercial pornography, and is a product of the relative powerlessness of women as a sex. Narrowing the focus on women's subordination to the explicitly sexual, they argue, downplays the sexism and misogyny at work within all our most respectable social institutions and practices, whether judicial, legal, familial, occupational, religious, scientific or cultural.

More dangerously (in today's conservative political climate), they fear that we risk terminating women's evolving exploration of our sexuality and pleasure by forming alliances with, instead of strongly combating, the conservative anti-pornography crusade. These are alliances which Dworkin and MacKinnon have unhesitatingly pursued in the US, collaborating almost exclusively with the extreme right: Presbyterian minister Mayor Hudnut III in Indianapolis; anti-ERA, anti-feminist, Republican conservative Bealah Coughenour in Minneapolis; far right preacher Greg Dixon; and of course the pro-family, anti-feminist Reagan appointee responsible for removing funds from Women's Refuges, Edwin Meese (Duggan, 1986, p. 63). Blanket condemnation of pornography, its critics stress, discourages us all from facing up to women's own sexual fears and infantile fantasies, which are by no means free from guilt, anxiety, shame, contradiction, and eroticisation of power on display in men's pornographic productions. What women need, according to feminists opposed to anti-pornography crusades, is not more censorship but more sexually explicit material produced by and for women, more open and honest discussion of all sexual issues, alongside the struggle against women's general subordinate economic and social status.

These then are currently the *four* (rather than three) distinct political positions on pornography. The question which for many is still seen as crucial, however, especially for those uncertain how to define and react to pornography, is whether pornographic images *are* responsible for inciting men's violence against women. Which position, if any, does existing empirical research, or other types of evidence, support?

Early Research on Pornography and its Effects

The liberal arguments which lay behind the relaxations in censorship in Britain and the USA in the 1970s seemed to win out then precisely because they were based almost entirely upon research, or what was seen as scientific evidence. There had been little systematic study of the effects of pornography before the US Commission on Obscenity and Pornography of 1970, which was set up in part to undertake new psychological research and report on existing literature. The conclusions from all the new and existing studies at that time were nearly unanimous in the view that pornography had no harmful effects on its consumers.

There can be few things more contested, even from within its own theoretical framework, than the relevance of the controlled and contrived social-psychological laboratory experiment to human action in the world at large. However, it was from within such research that many of the conclusions of policy-makers and campaigners around pornography have been and are still drawn. Considering the impact of pornographic material on sexual arousal and behaviour, the studies of the 1970s reported that a large proportion of adult males and females did find sexually explicit material arousing; men tended to display more arousal in response to films and photographs, women to written material. Heterosexual people were more aroused by heterosexual material, and homosexual males by homosexual material. Despite repeated exposure to slides showing highly 'deviant' sexual activity, subjects showed no tendency to copy such practices. (For better or worse, those habitually practising 'missionary sex' remained untempted by the titillating representations of its alternatives!) Those with less guilt, and more liberal attitudes to sexuality, found pornographic material more arousing. The greater the exposure to sexually arousing material, however, the less the arousal. And the greater the exposure to such material, the more liberal and tolerant of it consumers became.

These studies thus reported *no* antisocial changes in sexual behaviour after short or long exposure to sexually explicit material (Byrne and Lamberth, 1970; Davis and Braucht, 1970; Mann *et al.*, 1970; Kutchinsky, 1973; and Mosher, 1970). At this time, only one study looked at the effects of exposure to pornography on aggressive behaviour (performatively

defined as willingness to administer electric shocks to another person to assist learning). This study by Tannenbaum (in Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987) found that exposure to highly arousing erotica did lead to increased shock levels being administered to another person (the experimenter's stooge or 'confederate') who had earlier angered the subject. However, Tannenbaum found that the same material also led to more positive behaviour towards the stooge if the previous interaction had been friendly.

Other studies undertaken by this Commission also supported the liberal position on pornography. Those investigating the connections between pornography and sex crimes in the US, for example, reported no correlation between pornographic consumption and juvenile crimes in general, while studies of convicted rapists found them to have had *less* exposure to pornography during adolescence, and also less recent exposure to pornography than the control group (Goldstein *et al.*, 1970; Walker, in Goldstein *et al.*, 1970; Johnson *et al.*, 1970). (Interestingly, and tellingly for later reports from people working with sex offenders to the 1985 Minneapolis hearings, the rapists themselves, though having access to pornography later than the general population, were nevertheless inclined to blame pornography for their crimes.)

The Commission also looked at empirical research by Kutchinsky from Denmark, which had removed all legal prohibitions between 1967 and 1969. Here again they found a *negative* correlation between access to pornography and sex crimes (Kutchinsky, 1973). The quite significant reductions in sex crimes reported over that same period convinced the Commission that access to pornography did not increase the rate of sexual crimes. Subsequent work (Kant and Goldstein, 1978) also confirmed that sex offenders had less exposure to pornography, both as teenagers and as adults. (Although it does not invalidate these findings, we do, however, need to be aware that rape is very often not reported, and rapists – especially if they are white and apparently 'respectable' – very often escape conviction. This means that those who are reported and successfully convicted are only a minority of rapists, and perhaps an atypical minority.)

The psychological and sociological research of the late 1960s and early 1970s which, by and large, concluded that there was *no* connection between pornographic consumption and either change in sexual practices or an increase in sexual violence, was always rejected as irrelevant by the Moral Right in both the US and Britain. As US newspaper columnist James Kilpatrick declared: 'Common sense is a better guide than laboratory experiments; and common sense tells us pornography is bound to contribute to sexual crime. ...It seems ludicrous to argue "bad" books do not promote bad behaviour' (in Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987, p. 1). More significantly, in terms of subsequent research, these studies were conducted just before the emergence of the feminist critique of pornography, which at first stressed its significance as part of our culture of sexism and misogyny and later, for some, stressed its role in directly causing violence against women, in being in itself violence against women. On the latter view, pornography becomes *the* source of myths about women's sexuality, teaching men that women enjoy being raped or sexually coerced. This feminist critique has helped spark off the new psychological research of the 1980s, which is currently being used by those seeking new legal restrictions on pornography.

Updating the Research on Pornography

Whereas in the 1960s and early 1970s studies of pornography had been concerned to look at the effects of pornography – seen as sexually explicit material – on men's general sexual practices or antisocial behaviour, by the late 70s the emphasis had shifted to the more specific study of men's violence against, or calloused and contemptuous attitudes towards, women. Feminists could indeed rightly claim it as a victory that whereas once the concern about pornography was mainly over its effects upon those who consumed it, today the concern is mainly over its effects upon those who are represented by it. Another reason for this shift, however, was the belief, encouraged by feminist writers like Dworkin, that pornography had become, and would continue to become, ever more violent – because of its assumed 'addictive' nature. This was the belief, for example, repeated throughout the Minneapolis and the subsequent, and similar, Meese Commission in the US. There is no evidence, however, to support it.

One study (Malamuth and Spinner, 1980) found that violent images in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* did increase from 1 to 5 per cent between 1973 and 1977 but a more recent US study (Scott, 1985) on such imagery in *Playboy* between 1954 and 1983 found a *decline* after 1977, with well under 1 per cent of material containing violent imagery – suggesting that the feminist critique is having some effect. Nor was there any increase in violent sexual imagery in 'adult' videos, according to a US study covering the years 1979 to 1983 (Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987, p. 67). In most pornography, it would seem – unlike in certain other genres of representation like horror and 'slasher' movies – violent imagery is rare. One recent New York survey reported between 3.3 and 4.7 per cent of violent imagery in a random sample of pornographic films, and another found 7 per cent of s/m or bondage imagery with women submissive in pornographic magazines, but 9 per cent with men submissive (Howitt and Cumberbatch, 1990, pp. 7–8). While it seems to be a myth that violent imagery in pornography has in fact been increasing, experiments on its possible effects have undoubtedly increased. The best summary of this newer research of the 1980s, most of it conducted in the US, can be found in Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod's book, *The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications* (1987).

Showing some awareness of the diverse and shifting definitions of the 'pornographic', the authors distinguish different types of pornography before seeking to detect its effects. First, and in line with previous studies, they reported a multitude of laboratory experiments, all of which failed to find any increase – following exposure to *non-violent* or soft-core porno-

graphic material – in men's aggressive or general antisocial behaviour, either towards other men or towards women. Indeed some of the experiments suggested that exposure to non-violent pornography lowers aggression levels and increases subjects' sociability, measured by their willingness to reward a confederate of the experimenter (with money) after such exposure, and their failure to increase their aggressiveness when angered after viewing such material. Exposure to this type of pornography did not alter subjects' attitudes towards rape.

Next, the authors looked at the research on what they defined as non-violent but degrading images of women (depictions of women as sexually promiscuous and insatiable, even in the face of men's callousness and contempt). For example, Check in 1985 (in Donnerstein, 1987) showed male subjects a film clip of a woman doctor being verbally abused and sexually harassed by a male, who, once she catches sight of his penis, is desperately eager for and enjoys instant sex. Following such exposure, Check claimed, his subjects were more likely to say that they might commit rape – if they could get away with it. Linz, on the other hand, also in 1985 (in Donnerstein, 1987), found that subjects watching a similar film narrative, *Debbie Does Dallas*, but seeing it in its entirety rather than in brief excerpts, exhibited no significant increase in their acceptance of calloused attitudes about rape, nor any increased likelihood to view women as sexual objects or to condone the actions of rapists and judge the victims of rape narratives as more responsible for their own assault. Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod therefore argued that no definite conclusions could be drawn about non-violent but degrading images of women (Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987).

Their main concern, however, was to explore the effects of pornographic material which depicts violence against women. Those familiar with Dworkin's or MacKinnon's frequent linking of pornography and the Holocaust ('Dachau brought into the bedroom and celebrated', Dworkin, 1981, p. 69) may be surprised that men in general list violence as the least titillating aspect of pornography, react to it with distress rather than pleasure, and have become less, rather than more, tolerant towards violent pornography. But, drawing upon their own research and that of Malamuth, Check and others, they did conclude that exposure to violent pornography (for example, depictions of rape) does increase sexual arousal in *some* men, especially if the victim is shown as 'enjoying' the rape. And a few subjects, those who say that they might commit a rape if they could get away with it, showed the same arousal even when the victim was seen to be suffering. Some researchers suggest, therefore, that arousal to sadistic material might provide a good predictor of men's proclivity to rape.

The main finding which Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod wanted to emphasise, therefore, was that exposure to aggressive pornography can not only arouse some men, but might in some cases, in particular contexts, alter certain men's attitudes and behaviour towards women. Specifically, such exposure can produce more calloused attitudes towards

women and greater acceptance of rape myths which downplay or dismiss the significance of rape. Malamuth and Donnerstein report, for example, that exposing male college students to sexually violent films in which a woman is raped but also portrayed as 'enjoying' it causes subjects, who have also been provoked by insults from a female 'confederate' of the experimenter, to score higher on a Rape Acceptance Scale (Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987). From other experiments which asked men whether they might commit rape if guaranteed they would not be caught, Malamuth and Check suggested that the negative effects they reported from exposure to violent pornography may only occur if men are already predisposed to consider sexual violence towards women. Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod therefore conclude that the calloused attitudes to rape, which may in certain cases follow exposure to violent pornography, may not so much be *caused* by the exposure to pornography as strengthened by it (Donnerstein *et al.*, 1987).

They further suggest, from experiments using imagery which is not sexually explicit but involves violence against women, that it is the violence, rather than the sexual explicitness, which is mainly responsible for any increase in aggressiveness and calloused attitudes in men following exposure to violent pornography. And this in turn means, as they indicate, that we should worry more about material which is not pornographic at all but which contains images of violence against women – from soap operas to popular commercially released films.

Psychologists Fall Out Over Experimental Research

There are nevertheless problems with the conclusions Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod draw from their survey of the psychological research on pornography in the 1980s – some of which the authors themselves admit. These problems stem from the intrinsic weaknesses of any such laboratory experiments. The highly artificial conditions in which psychologists produce their results may not involve behaviour which is in any way generalisable. So, for instance, the tests of arousal have been criticised by Canadian psychologist Thelma McCormack because the subjects' own reports of sexual arousal may be unreliable, and the apparatus used to measure tumescence (expansion of the penis) may itself stimulate arousal (McCormack, 1985).

There is the additional problem of the failure of these experiments even to consider the complex question of the relationship between fantasy and reality, between psychic arousal and behaviour. They assume some direct causal relation between arousal to sado-masochistic fantasy and the seeking out of such engagements in reality, when we know, for instance, from the surveys of Nancy Friday, Shere Hite and Thelma McCormack (and others) that such fantasy is commonly used by both women and men to enhance sexual arousal – particularly masochistic fantasy (Friday, 1973; Hite, 1976). It would be absurd to suggest that most of us therefore happily accept the existence of rape, let alone that we desire to be raped. So arousal to sexual fantasy which includes images of violence would seem,

contrary to the expectations of these psychologists, to be a particularly poor predictor of behaviour.

Similarly, the laboratory measures for increases in violent behaviour following exposure to violent pornography may also have little correspondence with subjects' likelihood to resort to real violence outside the laboratory. The measure most often used is the subject's willingness to act in complicity with the experimenter in apparently delivering an electric shock to the experimenter's 'confederate' for failure in some task, usually after having also been provoked in some way by this same confederate. But the validity of this test of aggressive behaviour will depend upon the laboratory behaviour having the same *meaning* for the subject as aggression in other situations – which seems most unlikely. (Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod themselves admit, as I have indicated, that laboratory 'aggression' may be unrepresentative of aggressive behaviour outside the laboratory.) There is also the danger, as in all psychological experiments, that subjects may 'wise up to the game', attempting to guess and confirm the experimenter's hypotheses – this is the now well-known 'experimenter demand effect'.

The extremely simplified and totally artificial nature of these experiments would seem to cast doubt on their usefulness in considering the shifting and complex meanings attached to events and behaviour in real life. Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod, for example, report that if, following exposure to rape narratives where the victim was depicted as 'enjoying' the rape, experimenters debriefed the subjects by pointing out that of course rape was always a terrible thing, then not only did subjects not show increased acceptance of rape myths or greater callousness towards women, but instead they displayed greater sensitivity about sexist material and a heightened *rejection* of rape myths. This effect, moreover, continued even many months after the original exposure to violent pornography followed by the debriefing, suggesting that the critical consumption of such material, for example in sex education classes, could prove useful.

As I have mentioned, the main finding of these recent experiments into men's reactions to depictions of sexual cruelty is that the usual response is one of anxiety and depression, of revulsion rather than of arousal (whether self-report or tumescence is the data being recorded). And in the smaller number of cases where arousal to sexual violence is reported, Donnerstein and Malamuth now themselves admit that they are not quite sure how to interpret their positive finding. As the psychologist C.W. Sherif points out, experimenters have always assumed that any male arousal must occur through the subject's identification with the male aggressor, but of course it could be that the subject identifies with the female victim (Sherif, 1980). These are some of the reasons why it is less than clear whether the recent experiments on violent pornography can establish that access to such material does in fact cause greater violence against women. Probably all they *can* establish is a weak effect in a very few people under carefully controlled experimental conditions.

It is because such findings, if we do accept their applicability, do not

apply to the vast bulk of commercial pornography, either in the US or Britain, that newer research has sought more to implicate 'standard' non-violent pornography in producing negative attitudes and behaviour towards women. James Weaver is the psychologist now most popular with the feminist anti-pornography campaigners. And it is Weaver's recent research that Catherine Itzin includes in her bulky collection of essays which aims to clear up all the misunderstandings and confusions surrounding the troubled topic of pornography, and to provide an up-to-date 'comprehensive and exhaustive' coverage (see Itzin, 1992, p. 9). Ironically, however, Weaver's work serves only to mock Itzin's opening references to the clear and consistent empirical evidence of links between pornography and violence. Weaver's research, in fact, overturns almost all previous research implicating only images of sexually explicit violence with more calloused attitudes in the laboratory from men towards women. His own data 'proves' that exposure to *any* sexually explicit images, but *especially* to 'consensual and female-instigated sex', produces the most calloused responses from *both men and women*!

Such research, were we to treat it with any seriousness in formulating legislation or educational and cultural policies, would of course only support the positions and strategies of the Moral Right, who have always been deeply horrified by the idea of women as sexually assertive, autonomous and entitled to sex on their own terms. It could be used not only to suggest that any type of sex education is dangerous, but to demand that we be particularly vigilant in protecting women and men from any representations of female control or empowerment in sexual situations. Since these are just the images and discourses some feminists, myself included, are trying hard to produce, the implications here are frightening indeed (Segal, 1992).

What we might more seriously conclude from all this experimental muddle, however, which provides anything but clear and consistent proof of anything at all, is not really so hard to see. *It is never possible, whatever the image, to isolate it, to fix its meaning and predict some inevitable pattern of response, independently from assessing its wider representational context and the particular recreational, educational or social context in which it is being received.* Men together can, and regularly do, pornographise any image at all – from the Arab woman in her chador to any coding of anything as male and female (nuts and bolts, for example) – while the most apparently 'violent' images of S & M pornography may be used in only the most consensual and caring encounters between two people. Context really does matter. This may help to explain why inconsistency is the *only* consistency to emerge from empirical research which ignores both the semiotic and the social context of images of sexual explicitness, as the most recent Home Office report on pornography commissioned in the UK concluded: 'Inconsistencies emerge between very similar studies and many interpretations of these have reached almost opposite conclusions' (Howitt and Cumberbatch, 1990, p. 94).

Personal Testimony of Harm

Some anti-pornography feminists who are more aware of both the inconsistency and the possible irrelevance of the experimental proof of pornography's harms have preferred to call upon the testimony of women's own experience of the harm they feel pornography has caused them. A typical example is the evidence provided by one woman at the Minneapolis public hearings. There she described how, after reading *Playboy, Penthouse* and *Forum*, her husband developed an interest in group sex, took her to various pornographic institutions and even invited a friend into their marital bed. To prevent any further group situations occurring, which she found very painful, this woman had agreed to act out in private scenarios depicting bondage and the different sex acts which her husband wanted her to perform, even though she found them all very humiliating (*Everywoman*, 1988, p. 68). It was only after learning karate and beginning to travel on her own that she felt strong enough to leave her husband. This is indeed moving testimony, but surely all along there was only one suitable solution to any such woman's distress: having the power and the confidence to leave a man who forced her into actions she wished to avoid, and who showed no concern at all for her own wishes. Pornography is not the problem here, nor its elimination the solution.

Another type of gruesome evidence frequently used by anti-pornography feminists to establish links between pornography and violence draws upon the myth of the 'snuff movie', first circulated in New York in 1975 about underground films supposedly coming from Latin America in which women were murdered on camera as they apparently reached a sexual climax. On investigation such movies, like the classic *Snuff* itself, released in the US in 1976, have always turned out to be a variant of the 'slasher' film, using the special effects of the horror genre and thus distinct from what is seen as the genre of pornography (Williams, 1990, pp. 189-95). There is, however, also the personal testimony of some former sex workers, exemplified by that of Linda 'Lovelace'/Marchiano. In her book *Ordeal*, Linda Marchiano has described how she was coerced, bullied and beaten by her husband, Chuck Traynor, into working as a porn actress. (Interestingly, although she was coerced into sex work by a violent husband, the book actually describes how it was her success as a porn actress in *Deep Throat* which gave her the confidence to leave her husband, remarry and start campaigning against pornography. See McClintock, 1992.)

The more general problem here is that other sex workers complain bitterly about what they see as the false and hypocritical victimisation of them by anti-pornography feminists, whose campaigns they believe would, if successful, serve only to worsen their pay and working conditions and increase the stigmatisation of their work (Delacoste and Alexander, 1988). (I am not referring here, of course, to the production of child pornography, which is illegal, along with other forms of exploitation of children.) Some sex workers declare that they choose and like the work they do, and the control they believe it gives them over their lives. Indeed, it has been suggested that the feminist anti-pornography campaign itself primarily reflects the privileges of largely white, middle-class women who, not being as exploited as many other women, can self-servingly present the issue of women's sexual objectification by men as the principal source of oppression of all women (Freccero, 1992).

Whether it is from abused women or abused sex workers, however, what we hear when we do hear or read women's testimony against pornography or the pornography industry is stories of women coercively pressurised into sex, or sexual display, which they do not want – from straight, to oral, anal, bondage and group sex. But we should be more than foolish if we saw the harm we heard about as residing in the pornographic images themselves, or in the possibility of enacting them (all, without any doubt, practices which certain women as well as men freely choose), and not in the men's (or possibly, although very rarely in heterosexual encounters, women's) abuse of power. The harm, it is important to be clear about, is contained not in the explicitly sexual material, but in the social context which deprives a woman (or sometimes a man) of her (or his) ability to reject any unwanted sexual activity – whether with husband, lover, parent, relative, friend, acquaintance or stranger. And this is one fundamental reason feminists opposed to anti-pornography campaigning are so distressed at each attempt to bring in some new version of the Minneapolis Ordinance, like the so-called Pornography Victims' Compensation Act first introduced into the US Senate in 1989 and cropping up again in New York in 1992, or Itzin's own proposals taken up by MPs like Dawn Primarolo in Britain.

It is not just that these bills, quite contrary to the self-deceiving rhetoric of their advocates (Itzin and Dworkin claim to be 'absolutely opposed to censorship in every form'), would suppress sexual and erotic materials by opening up the threat of quite unprecedented levels of censorship through harassing lawsuits and financial penalties against producers, distributors, booksellers, writers, photographers and movie-makers. It is also that, again quite contrary to the stated goals of their supporters, such legislative proposals cost nothing and do nothing to provide real remedies against men's violence. State funding for women's refuges; anti-sexist, anti-violence educational initiatives; and, above all, empowering women more fundamentally through improved job prospects, housing and welfare facilities, would seem to be the only effective ways of enabling women to avoid violence.

Instead, however, the idea that pornographic material causes men's violence tends to excuse the behaviour of the men who are sexually coercive and violent, by removing the blame on to pornography. Men who rape, murder and commit other violent sex crimes against women, children or other men may (or may not) have an interest in violent pornography. However, as overviews of all the available empirical data suggest, the evidence does not point to pornography as a cause of their behaviour (Howitt and Cumberbatch, 1990, p. 94). When Itzin, along with so many of the

authors in her collection, weirdly but repeatedly cite as 'evidence' for pornography's harm the final testimony of serial killer Ted Bundy before his execution, they surely do more to expose rather than to support their argument. Today both the rapist and, even more hypocritically, tabloid wisdom have learnt to lay the blame for sex crimes on 'pornography' (whereas once, with the same certainty, they would lay the blame on 'mothers').

Meanwhile, although Dworkin, MacKinnon, Itzin and their supporters continue to argue that it is pornography which violates women's civil rights by increasing discrimination against them, studies in the US and Europe have tended to reverse the picture. In the US it is in states with a preponderance of Southern Baptists (followers of leading anti-pornography campaigner Jerry Falwell) that the highest levels of social, political and economic inequality between women and men can be found – despite the lowest circulation of pornography (Baron, 1990). Indeed, Larry Baron discovered a positive correlation between equal opportunities for women in employment, education and politics and higher rates of pornography, which he attributed to the greater social tolerance generally in states which provided such opportunities. Such findings are consistent with those from Europe, where we find far higher levels of economic, political and other indices of gender equality in Sweden and Denmark compared with either the US or Britain, and lower levels of violence against women – coupled with more liberal attitudes towards pornography (Kutchinsky, 1990). Baron's survey, interestingly, also found that gender inequality correlated with the presence and extent of *legitimate* use of violence in a state (as measured by the numbers of people trained to work in the military, corporal punishment in schools, government use of violence as in the death penalty), as well as with mass-media preferences for violence, as in circulation rates of *Guns and Ammo*).

Beyond Pornography

It is time for feminists, and their supporters, who want to act against men's greater use of violence and sexual coercion, and their continuing social dominance, to abandon the search for some spurious causal link with 'pornography' – however we define it. Most men are, as they always have been, quite capable of using violence without the assistance of pornography. We are, it is true, ubiquitously surrounded by images and discourses which represent women as passive, fetishised objects, and men as active, controlling agents, devoid of weakness, passivity or any type of 'femininity'. They saturate all scientific and cultural discourses of the last hundred years – from sexology, embryology and psychoanalysis to literary and visual genres, high and low – and they construct the dominant images of masculinity to which so many men, inevitably, fail to match up. Women provide the most available scapegoats for the perceived shame and anxiety this causes them.

Men don't need pornography to encounter these 'facts' of crude and coercive, promiscuous male sexualities, or helpless and yielding, nurturing female sensitivities. The anxious mirrorings of these narratives of male transcendence and female passivity (as well as occasional challenges to them) are, it is true, on offer in the culturally marginal and generally disparaged genre of 'pornography'. Women (or men) may well choose to pull down or deface the sexist pin-ups or pornography which men together may use to create their own exclusionary space or to taunt the women around them. (Some women have preferred to paste up their own images of penile display, which usually brings down the pin-ups.) There is a variety of tactics we can use to discredit, mock or remove images we find offensive from the personal and public spaces of our lives. It is a battle which has only just begun. But there is no compelling reason to focus upon sexually explicit material alone, unless as feminists we do wish to throw in our lot with the initiatives and goals of the Moral Right.

In the end, anti-pornography campaigns, feminist or not, can only enlist today, as they invariably enlisted before, guilt and anxiety around sex, as well as lifetimes of confusion in our personal experiences of sexual arousal and activity. In contrast, campaigns which get to the heart of men's violence and sadism towards women must enlist the widest possible resources to empower women socially to seek only the types of sexual encounters they choose, and to empower women sexually to explore openly their own interests and pleasures. We do need the space to produce our own sexually explicit narratives and images of female desire and sensuous engagement, if we are even to begin to embark upon that journey. And there are certain to be people who will feel harmed and provoked by our attempts. Let us hope they are not empowered to prevent us: like the Canadian courts whose new 'feminist' anti-pornography legislation was recently used against two lesbian magazines, or the leading anti-pornographer Jesse Helms in the US, launching his investigation of Post-Porn Modernist Annie Sprinkle as she performs on stage in California to promote women's active, pleasurable and spiritual enjoyment of their sexuality.

Note: This essay is a substantially extended and reworked version of an article which appeared in *Feminist Review*, no. 36, Autumn 1990.

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