

Experiences in Canada and the US show how wrongheaded this is. Even the most carefully formulated feminist anti-pornography legislation will be first supported, and then distorted by conservatives. The Minneapolis ordinance, a collaboration between Radical Feminists, the religious Right and local anti-vice crusaders was thrown out by a superior court because it constituted an infringement of civil liberties. In Canada shipments to gay and lesbian bookstores are routinely seized at the border and publications often appear with pages blanked out.

In Britain alternative bookshops have spent thousands in the last few years fighting customs seizures, an example of existing laws being used repressively. Outlawing obscenity will not significantly affect large-scale commercial pornography which knows no borders. It will have a potentially devastating effect on small, alternative, lesbian and gay and women's publications. It will also mean an end to porn industry workers' attempts to improve conditions, since illegality and stigma form the worst possible basis for organizing.

Suddenly the feminist movement that once fought for freedom and sexual self-determination is advocating giving power over our lives to the judges and the police; suddenly what it says about our freedom and our sexual desires sounds like the ravings of the Right. Suddenly feminism is about censorship rather than about opening possibilities.

There is a place for sexually explicit material in our lives. We need a feminism and a society which respects sexual variety and sexual choice.

Don't support censorship under any guise.



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Ask yourself . . .

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 right wingers and misogynists, 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 oppressions in the world, not to reduce all oppression to pornography.

Do you really want more censorship?



FEMINISTS AGAINST CENSORSHIP

Who defines pornography?

Much commercially available pornography is racist and misogynist. In a racist, misogynist society this is no surprise. It is possible to criticize specific pieces of pornography without being in favour of increasing the State's power to suppress pornography itself and without regarding sexually explicit material as bad in itself.

Even those who agree that sexually explicit material should be suppressed find it impossible to agree on what should go. The traditional pro-censorship lobby would destroy lesbian and gay material in the name of the Family. They seek to suppress safer sex information on the grounds that it encourages homosexuality. They have done everything in their power to prevent distribution of information about birth control and abortion; they consider this to be pornography as well. There is also sincere disagreement among anti-pornography feminists. Some argue that nudity alone is pornographic, others that the problem is violent pornography alone. With this much disagreement even among feminists, who can you trust? Do you think the Government will appoint feminists as censors?

Instead of striking a blow against women's oppression, censorship gives the patriarchy additional ammunition. It is inconsistent to oppose Clause 28 one year and support censorship the next.

Pornography, a red herring?

In the words of the Campaign Against Pornography (CAP), "Pornography . . . violates women's rights to safety and equality, encourages and legitimates the abuse of women and children, sexually and emotionally, and involves the abuse and exploitation of women and children in its production."

Strong stuff, but women's oppression in society is more complex than this.

Let's talk about real violence against women, not just images. Violence has multiple causes, one of which may be a high consumption of violent images. Studies are inconclusive. Most suggest violent images have no impact and that it makes no difference whether the images are sexually explicit. Yet it is precisely the comparatively rare combination of violent and sexually explicit images in pornography that anti-pornography feminists see as being at the root of women's oppression in society. Why are they ignoring the fundamental causes of cultural and social oppression? Their single minded focus on pornography has distracted attention from more effective feminist responses to violence and oppression; for example women's refuges, self-defence initiatives, alternative media, campaigns for better transport and better sex education, and attempts to make women economically independent.

Is pornography really the problem? Is its suppression really going to change women's low economic status? Will it remove the real violence which sustains unequal power? Many anti-pornography feminists are so concerned with pornography that they are ignoring the damage done to women by cuts in the NHS, the increase in racist attacks, assaults on lesbians and gay men, the promotion by the government of an ideology which reduces the freedom of women in the name of the Family and the erosion of women's rights throughout the world.

Censorship is dangerous

Anti-pornography feminists' solution to male violence is a dangerous new departure. The belief that there are direct causal links between pornography and violence has led groups like CAP to advocate authoritarian measures. These include censorship, euphemistically referred to as 'legislation against pornography'. The danger allegedly posed by pornography is said to justify increasing the power of the State and trusting it not to abuse that power.