Pornography: Liberation or Oppression?
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pornography: liberation or oppression

The session on pornography drew perhaps 400-500 women. It began with a short overview presented by the Washington area group Feminists Against Pornography (FAP). Many of the women who spoke at the beginning of the session seemed unaware of the fact that pornography is a $7 billion dollar industry, and that there are more hardcore bookstores than there are McDonald's. Sexuality is not necessarily a taboo topic any more.

Tracy Gardner, who is from an Oakland, California group called Homeward Bound, spoke. She said she had worked at a rape crisis center and had been raped herself, and that she had been dissatisfied with the outreach of the staff at both projects. She felt the institutions dealt with women outside their community. Politics of Sexuality, Homeward Bound, had been founded in a Black, low-income community where she runs classes for men on rape and couples on how to cope with violence in the family. Many of her clients have been in court for violence against their wives.

She teaches them about family development. She doesn't think marital rape has an abuse and an abuser. She says that couples give emotional, having children is difficult and sex becomes obligatory. Men bring pornography into sex in order to find partners and make it better. She teaches couples how to touch and tell them that a man's sexual part is his penis and a woman's is her breasts. All pornography profits from profit on pornography, she said. (A few women in the audience raised their hands. If we don't see this, we will alienate many men and women, Gardner said. How can we see positive images of relations, she asked?)

anti-porn manhunters

The next speaker was Ann Snitow, co-editor of the book Power and Patriarchy, who was not a regularly scheduled panelist. The conference coordinator had called her at the last moment that they must include Snitow because she was the last point of view on pornography. Batt-Ann Bar On agreed not to give her scheduled presentation. Snitow didn't come.

We don't, we all don't agree on pornography. There is a storm brewing in the women's movement on sexual politics.

Young women entering the movement are particularly likely to encounter the anti-pornography groups, she said.

In its context, man-hating was a good idea for a time, Snitow said. It is now focused in the anti-pornography movement, which is achieving energy by raising female rape. But getting outraged on sexual issues is not the best way for women to work for changes, she said.

She cited the work of historians Linda Gordon, Ellen Dubois and Irene Walkowitz, who have said that nineteenth century feminists worked to restrict or abolishing prostitution and only managed to make prostitutes' lives more difficult. Also, they say that nineteenth century feminists accepted the idea that women and men had different roles, thus reinforced the idea of gender. Now, the idea that gender is a useful way of organizing women is dead, Snitow says.

The late '60s radical feminism, Snitow said, Anne Foote said that women and men were sexually different. But Shulamith Firestone said they weren't, that sex and gender were different. For a brief moment, women were seen as wanting sex and being able to initiate it, which was a new and hopeful development.

How has this become a movement that says heterosexuality is forced? Or that violence and rape rather than the family, child care and economics are the fundamental institutions of sexism? Why, she asked, do the many powers of men get turned into the sexual and pornography?

porn easy target?

Snitow suggested reasons for these developments. Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) got going in 1976, when the Hyde Amendment putting public funding for abortions passed congress. Since then women's power to affect institutions to change has declined. Perhaps women have turned from attacking institutions because images are easier to attack, Snitow said. To bring sex and violence together is to deny that heterosexual women have a sexual interest in men. It denies why any place in the long history of heterosexuality. But Shulamith Firestone says that if forced to choose between feminism and sexuality, any feminist woman's heart would not choose sex, Snitow said. "I say this is no choice at all."

Hustler's pool table

Pauline Bart, a sociologist from the University of Illinois, spoke next. I was a reluctant researcher on pornography, she said, but I am reluctant no longer. Her indignant voice sounded a challenge to Snitow. Bart recited a verse of hers, "Breathes there a woman with a mind complex who hasn't been called a sex?"

Extensive research done primer-

I won't be able to shade what I say as much as I want, she said. The Supreme Court has revived around moralism from a rape point of view, she said. View of pornography is politics, not morality. It is women's point of view, although it is risky to say that there's a feminist point of view on pornography. I shall see feminism as consistent with my view of feminism. My historical context is contemporary feminism in this country.

The commentary on the slide show said that pornography is ideology. She said, I see the law on pornography as ideology. The law on pornography is to pornography as life is to life. Pornography is not a confusion presented of otherwise healthy sex, but is a reflection of sex. Gender is a bad sexual. Pornography is the meaning of that sexuality. Pornography is the way that men see women. Pornography shows how women have tortured and ecstasically reject self-determi-

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ity that exists in pornography is not a distortion or a symbol. It is a sexual reality, McKinnon said. It is the very palpable, present, ongoing, palpable and ongoing representation of the view of men. Objectivity is a way of looking at the sexual process, McKinnon. The most pornographic and least objective, who did what to whom. The male viewer has sex with the female image, with the interest and will of the viewer, and each other. She is the woman.

Minow's 1973 ruling in the Miller case which gave a standard for deciding whether material is legally obscene, whether the average person, using contemporary community standards, finds it obscene, or whether the work as a whole lacks literary, artistic, or scientific value.
The contemporary feminist critique of pornography asks whether the average person exists, she continued. It questions community, and asks what the community is. It asks whether the state and the courts which tell rape from intercourse should be told what is obscene. Also, we object to the notion of what is valuable by existing community standards of science and of the arts. How can we object to jokes about courts? trying to distinguish pornography from literature? We can. This is drawing lines makes the feminist point, because it is a way of establishing a system.

To feminists, pornography is the essence of this society, McKinnon said. To say that obscenity is not speech, Johnson, she said. Liberal values do not apply to the situation of women. The First Amendment (to the U.S. Constitution) presumes the validity of the distinction between public and private. The private sphere is the sphere of personal lib- erty. Pornography can be thrust at innocent women and men. It is an illegal business. Alice Walker ("Loving Apart") in You Can't Be A Good Woman..., tells about a Black woman who is alienated from her husband because of the threat of incest in pornography. Dianne Russell (a sociologist) asked women what they had been told to do sex acts that they knew had been drawn from pornography, and 109 said yes. (Responses were randomly drawn from the population of San Francisco.

speech free for men

Constitutional theory says the First Amendment allows the truth to be told while a lie is censored. Partial truth, she said. That concept would be okay in a non-hierarchi- cal society, but in the context of power and powerlessness, pornography makes a reality which it can pass as truth.

The Supreme Court does not see pornography as a lie, racism, is not unorthodox but is the prevailing idea. 

McKinnon argues that pornography erases women's minds and bodies, if enforces male power and male slavish silence, if it is not for men is unfree speech for women. McKinnon argued that the First Amendment is that speech is free, a natural law concept, she said. It begins with the words "Congress shall not abridge the freedom of the press." pornography shall not abridge the freedom of the press. That is, it assumes that everything is all right unless the government intervenes. It assumes that people are equally. It assumes that some are not systematically silenced. The inequity of the sexes makes this idea untenable.

Pornography and the law of pornography are about power, men's power over women. The law does not see pornography as a woman's issue, but it is. The status of women is at stake. Women in the audience applauded her talk loudly. They had applauded all of the speakers, but I think McKinnon drew the most.

A questioner in the audience asked about theMen's Movement, and said that the anti-pornography argument assumes that dominance is not erotic to women. Langland said the pornography that we are talking about is made by men for men. We would be happy to see images by lesbians for lesbians.

Langland said women are not exempt. Analysis would be wrong if most sexual fantasies were not based on pornography. Each sex constructs the way this society constructs us. He called society pornographic. Why are we turned on by what we are turned on by? It's not in our blood. Lesbian and gay sexual differences is not different. It's what you see if you are raised in a culture that enforces the sexu- ality is the same, this is not to say that we all are politically. Sexually. He has not been unable to say the same.

Siltow said that society is saturated with misogyny, it is in everything, including pornography and child care. Is dominance/sub- mission the main source of this? Perhaps infamy is the source of the dominance/submission fantasy. Perhaps things might change if parenting were different. Tracy Gardner asked if McKinnon didn't think people in this society could have good sexual rela- tions? Gardner said she thinks some do.

Another woman in the audience expressed anger at Gardner and Siltow for worrying about sexualizing. She said she doesn't hate men when they respect to sex. She also was angry that Gardner said the breasts were the center of female sexuality. Her outburst drew some applause and some hisses. Another woman asked what we do.

Langland of FAP said we need to change the structure of society. Meanwhile, we can resist street harass- ment aimed at other women as well as ourselves. McKinnon said she thinks there is no reform version of this issue, but she had thought there were no possible reforms on sexual harassment and found there were. She didn't choose this because it was an easy issue. We won't see an end to this. A war, she said. One instance is when a woman leaves the batterer for good. Despair is both justified and beside the point.

by carole anne douglas

Political/Ethical Conflicts in Feminist Legal Practice

This workshop was attended by over 100 women and a few men, many of whom were young lawyers or legal advisors who are working to develop a balance between feminism and constraints of the legal system.

The panelists were Martha Minow, who teaches at Stanford Law School; Susan Yarbrough, director of the Women's Litigation Center, of the New York Attorney General's office; Anne E. Simon, staff attorney with the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York; and Nancy Bekavac, a partner with a corporate law firm in Los Angeles.

Minow commented that lawyers are often perceived as a "public utility, like hair, or gas," because they have a legal duty to represent unpopular clients. Minow said that in order to keep personal distaste from entering into professional ac- tions, lawyers "must remain detached from the process and integrity of the legal system.

Women lawyers find it especially difficult according to Minow, due to pressures from "the team" and, i.e., a macho attitude that, "unless you can represent anyone, you haven't learned to be a lawyer." A feminist lawyer finds herself representing a man's interest, the very fact that she is a woman is used to deny her cli- ent's advantage in the minds of both judge and jury. If a feminist law- yer is representing a man in rape or custody case, for example, distinct political and ethical conflicts arise.

Yarbrough said she has had some forami of political/ethical conflict every day in the nine years she's been working. Because she has chosen to practice criminal law, she always makes representations to cli- ents because men are most likely to be charged with criminal offenses. As a feminist, it's very hard to be "unpopular" with any of the women artists, without the law, Yarbrough said, "the odds are there," and she inhabits a world where there are many questions about the role of women in criminal law.

Yarbrough's definition of a feminist practice is a "careful use of words, dealing with the political philosophy." For example, she tried to establish the culpability of the victim in a rape case. Also, she asked the "principled moral com- mitment to women" which went against prevailing "articular- sion principles," that it is paramount to identify as first, not as lesbians. Because it makes men come to grips with the moral questions of sexuality, it makes for a sexual, which, she has been asked by others, easier for lesbians and heterosexual- men to approach each other and build a political base.

Anne Simon then spoke of her experiences as a feminist lawyer representing men in custody cases.

She discussed the state's role in "perpetuating class/race oppression in the welfare system," pointing out that when a man is tracked down for delinquency of children, welfare payments, the money goes back to the woman and children.

Bekavac focused on the diffi- culty of being a feminist in the overwhelmingly male field of corporate law. Most of the issues she deals with on the job aren't ter- ritorially political, so she does not move (literally, meaning, "for good") usual work on issues she cares about.

Bekavac said that her hardest job was dealing with her male colleagues on a daily basis. Most of them consider themselves liberals, and are "surprised" when they are less than appreciative of their "locker room tactics." She also finds that she is the "asbestos in an explo- sive situation." It's okay to look to her as a facilitator. However, she has found that by maintaining a sense of vision and sticking it out, she has learned a lot from them and vice versa. Bekavac said that every woman has to evaluate when the drawbacks are outweighing the rewards, but when women leave a male-dominated bastion, men win.

She concluded that women lawyers never get to the point where they can relax. She quipped, "It's too difficult; it gets different."