

Roundtable Views

In February 1994, *Ms. magazine* ran an article "Where do we Stand on Pornography?" Ms. gathered a group of prominent US feminists to discuss the issue of pornography and censorship. Three years later, many of the arguments still hold true. In the Asia-Pacific region, the issues of pornography and censorship are taking center stage. We decided to re-run excerpts of this article as the issues are the same and, as in this article, the positions among feminists in the Asian region are also diverse.

Andrea Dworkin: ...The statutory definition [of pornography] has to be very concrete. But when we talk about what is pornographic in our culture, for most people that has many subjective dimensions to it.

Norma Ramos:I look at pornography as a system and practice of prostitution, as evidence of women's second class status. It is a very central feature of patriarchal society, an essential tool in terms of how men keep power over women.

Folks who defend pornography as free expression are actually defending some of the narrowest thinking I can imagine. When people consider the misery that it takes to make this stuff, the lives that have to be exploited and shattered to produce these images, ...it isn't just about what you see, it's what it took for a human being to be in that position—it takes a whole lot of abuse. It takes women who have been sexually abused in childhood, who have been robbed of their self-esteem, and who are vulnerable to this exploitative sexuality.

Marilyn French: There was a time when it was very clear to me that pornography involved both the use of the body, usually a female body, and power, so that what you had in essence was sadism. Now I am not sure what human sexuality is. I am not sure to what degree normal human sexuality contains elements of power and sadism.

There are pictures in men's magazines in which women are making love to women; they're not hurting each other. This is a situation of equality.

Dworkin: But they're *not* making love to each other. There's a social relationship between the photographer and the consumer. So-called lesbian layouts in heterosexual male pornography provide two women for the male consumer. What you see are the orifices of their bodies turned for his sexual pleasure.

Ramos: Men are getting sexual pleasure from our subordination. What if racism had been turned into sexual pleasure the way the oppression of women has been? When you struggle against the oppression, the opposition stands up and says, "No, you are fighting against my pleasure." A very big piece of that is learned behavior. And, in our society, it's socialized by the pornography. Even if you're not directly consuming the pornography, you're getting those images through advertising and movies.

Gloria Jacobs: But what about the possibility that some women are saying: "We enjoy certain kinds of sex that have power differentials, but it's not sadistic, and we don't want to be attacked for it. We don't want to have our sexuality negated because we probably can't change how we feel about sex in our lifetime."

Dworkin: In the United States, censorship seems to have an ever-expanding meaning depending on who's using it. In legal terms, censorship has always meant prior restraint: you pass a law that stops something from being made or being done.The Constitution protects the magazines. It is not the speech of women that is being protected. It's a way of making women into chattel. Who do they belong to? The pimps and the consumers of the magazines and the movies.

Gillespie: We almost automatically speak of pornographers and consumers of pornography as "he," but there are materials made by and for women.

Ramos: Sexuality is socialized. The pleasure principles did not come by accident. ...

But what I'm saying is that women are socialized into actually getting sexual pleasure through their powerlessness. And it is very hard to opt out of this socialization. So I understand your question speaks to this reality. It's a struggle that a lot of us wage personally. ...

French: I seriously doubt that anybody can change his or her sexuality.

Dworkin: But sexuality does change. As your life changes, your fantasies change.

On the issue of censorship and laws that address pornography, the women had this to say:

Ramos: ...I've heard this before: "I don't trust the government so we'd better not do anything on pornography." Well, we don't trust the government, but we have other civil rights laws.

French: The government is not going to use a sexual harassment law to keep me from publishing a novel, but it could use an anti-pornography law.

Dworkin: The obscenity laws can already be used against you. I think they should be repealed.

Ramos: I think censorship helps pornography flourish; the laws should be repealed. Let's have some power in the hands of women and then we'll have some real political discussion about censorship and sexual exploitation.

The feminists in the roundtable discussion article were:

Andrea Dworkin, author of 10 books including *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and *Letters From a War Zone*.

Marilyn French, author of *The Women's Room*, *The War Against Women* and *From Eve Till Dawn*.

Norma Ramos, a lawyer and anti-pornography and environmental justice movements activist.

Ntozake Shange, author of *Brilliant* and the play "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf."

Marcia Ann Gillespie, editor of *Ms.* There was no information on Gloria Jacobs.