

**F**eminists for Free Expression (FFE), a US national, not-for-profit anti-censorship organization, is deeply concerned about sexual harassment in schools and workplaces and believes that gender-based harassment—like all serious social problems—requires thoughtful, fundamental solutions. It is alarmed by the facile proposals popular today among some policy-makers and activists who claim that banning a list of “bad” words and images will improve the condition of women. It will not. Such quick-fix solutions ignore the substantive causes of sexual har-

assment and establish restrictions on words and images that will harm women’s interests. Without tolerance for a broad range of words and images, women could never have founded a feminist movement—considered dangerous and sinful—25 years ago. Without tolerance, the goals of women will be harmed today.

Sanitizing work place speech in defense of women workers enshrines archaic stereotypes of women as delicate, asexual creatures who require special protection from mere words and images.

# Feminism and Free



Luz Maria Martinez

**Why should women put up with offensive speech? Why not define sexual harassment as broadly as possible?**

Should the law prohibit all words and pictures that someone in a workplace or school finds offensive, much speech—certainly, much interesting speech—would soon be illegal. Women’s speech might well be thought offensive because it runs counter to a worker’s religious beliefs. Feminist material on reproductive choice would be particularly vulnerable. Should the state force a woman to remove a pro-choice poster or magazine article from her office because another worker finds it objectionable? History teaches us that, once in place, censorship schemes are used to stifle feminist advocacy of social change. Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger was jailed under censorship laws. Today in

selves make and enjoy sexual banter. Very broad restrictions on sexual material treat women as infants and shore up destructive Victorian stereotypes that they are (or should be) so pure that any expression about sexuality offends and demoralizes them. This is not a feminist position.

Finally, focus on sexual material diverts attention from the underlying causes of harassment. Gender-based harassment (whether it uses sexual language or not) is typically a power play by men who feel threatened by women’s progress toward equality or even their mere presence. It is the deeply-rooted social causes of such hostility that policy-makers need to address.

**FEMINISM AND FREE SPEECH: PORNOGRAPHY**

Feminism and Free Speech:

◆ No research, including the US Surgeon General’s report, finds a link between “kinky” or “degrading” images and violence. Exposure to such material does not cause people to change their sexual preferences or commit acts against their will. The derailed impulses of child abusers and rapists are caused by childhood traumas. “They are not,” wrote leading researcher John Money, “borrowed from movies, books, or other people.”

◆ Studies on violent pornography are inconsistent. Some find it increases aggression in the lab, some find it does not. Research also shows that aggression will be increased by anything that agitates a subject (raises heart rate, adrenaline flow, etc.), not only violent movies but also riding exercise bicycles. Agitation will boost whatever follows it, aggression or generosity.

Dr. Suzanne Ageton, measuring violence out of the lab, found that membership in a delinquent peer group accounted for three-fourths of sexual aggression.

◆ Studies in the US, Europe, and Asia find no link between the availability of sexual material and sex crimes. The only factor linked to rape rate is the number of young men living in a given area. When pornography became widely available in Europe, sexually violent crimes decreased or remained the same. Japan, with far more violent pornography than the US, has 2.4 rapes per 100,000 people while US has 34.5.

**MYTH:** Men Watch Pornography and Copy it or Force Women to do What They See

◆ Violence and intimidation have existed for thousands of years before commercial pornography and countries with no pornography, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, have been violating women’s rights for ages. Men have forced women to

# Speech

Canada, feminist books (ironically, including two by Andrea Dworkin who has long advocated restrictions on erotic speech) are being seized by Customs and prosecuted in the courts for violation of a new “obscenity” law.

**Isn’t sexual material inherently harmful to women?**

Those who focus on sexual speech and presume it’s inherently offensive to women miss the point. Gender-based harassment should be illegal whether or not it relies on sexual language or imagery. A woman is likely more intimidated by comments that she is “slow” or “dumb” than by sexual jokes. Moreover, women them-

Pornography is part of the Feminism and Free Speech series produced by Feminists for Free Expression. The following are excerpts from the material on the Internet provided by FFE based on scientific and cross-cultural research and legal and historical data on sexually explicit material:

**MYTH:** Sexually Explicit Material Causes Violence Against Women

◆ No reputable research in the US, Europe, or Asia finds a causal link between pornography and violence. Dr. Judith Becker said, “I’ve been working with sex offenders for 10 years, and have reviewed the scientific literature and I don’t think a causal link exists.”



do things—sexual and non-sexual—for centuries. The problem is not sex, it's force.

- ◆ People do not mimic what they read or view in knee-jerk fashion. If they did, feminist books for the last 25 years would have transformed this into a perfect feminist world. If they did, advertisers could run an ad and consumers would obey. Instead, companies spend millions of dollars on advertising and consumers still buy mainly based on price. People juggle words and images—good and bad—with all the others that they have seen or heard with all their real life experiences. It is experience that is the strongest teacher.
- ◆ Men do not learn coercion from pictures of sex. They learn it from the violence and contempt for women in their families and communities where each generation passes down what sorts of force are acceptable, even “manly.”
- ◆ Copycat theories are “porn made me do it” excuses for rapists and batterers. They relieve criminals of responsibility for their acts.

**MYTH: Pornography Degrades Women**

- ◆ Sexism, not sex, degrades women. Though sexism pervades our culture in many forms, we will not eliminate it by banning sex. Sexism and violence stem from long-standing economic, political, and emotional factors. These are the ones that need addressing.
- ◆ Women interpret pornography in different ways. Some find it sexist; some find it a form of fantasy, like dreams and movies we run in our head when we masturbate or have sex. Opponents of sexual speech do not realize that it is in everyone's interest to allow a variety of pleasurable materials that enhance well-being and sexual fulfillment.
- ◆ The only work removed under Canada's new obscenity standard (which claims to outlaw the deg-

radation of women) is an erotic magazine made by and for women.

**MYTH: Pornography is Only for Men**

- ◆ Half the adult videos in the US are bought or rented by women alone or women in couples.
- ◆ Sexual health professionals recommend pornography as entertainment and information for women and men. It may enhance failing marriages and help couples talk about and experiment with sex.

## HISTORY TEACHES US THAT, ONCE IN PLACE, CENSORSHIP SCHEMES ARE USED TO STIFLE FEMINIST ADVOCACY OF SOCIAL CHANGE.

- ◆ AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases have made it a public health necessity to encourage sexual fantasy material that offers women and men safe alternatives to unhealthy sexual contact.

**MYTH: The Women in Pornography are Exploited or Victimized**

- ◆ Women are exploited and harassed in all fields, some are in pornography. Exploitation will stop when it is vigorously prosecuted wherever it occurs.
- ◆ When the National Organization for Women (NOW) considered launching a campaign against pornography, women in pornography protested saying that a ban against it would create a black market of exploitation. Some said their work gave them independence and a sense of accomplishment; banning it would worsen their lives. NOW abandoned its proposed campaign.

**MYTH: As an Aid to Masturbation, Pornography is Action that is not Protected by the First Amendment.**

- ◆ Pornography may lead to masturbation much as a novel or film may lead to tears or laughter. All are protected by the First Amendment, including those that some find offensive. “The government may not prohibit,” wrote the Supreme Court, “the expression of an idea because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.”
- ◆ Feminists for Free Expression does not believe that policing masturbation is the proper business of government or well-meaning committees.

**MYTH: Banning Sexual Material will Protect or Help Women**

- ◆ Historically, censorship has hurt women. Information about sex and reproduction has been banned under the guise of “protecting” women—from the jailing of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger to the “gag rule” against abortion counseling in federally funded clinics to the attacks against National Endowment for the Arts grant recipient Holly Hughes. It has never reduced sexism or violence.
- ◆ If one group may be censored because some find it offensive, all groups may be censored, including women. The best protection for women's ideas and voices is the constitutional protections of free speech.
- ◆ Sexual images that do not meet women's needs should not be restricted. Better images should be made. The answer to bad pornography is good pornography, not no pornography.

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