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SOME HARMS TO WOMEN FROM RESTRICTIONS ON SEXUALLY RELATED EXPRESSION*

LEONORE TIEFER**

Women today are in more danger from the repression of sexually explicit materials than from their free expression. Pornography is, if anything, sexually transgressive material. But, because women's sexuality has been repressed, suppressed, and oppressed, what is needed is more transgressive opportunity, not less.

I want to justify this claim with five points based on the current state of women's sexuality as I have learned about it. I have to begin with the usual disclaimer that the people whose sexuality I know best through my work as a psychologist specializing in sexuality all come to me because they have complaints and dissatisfactions and, thus, probably are not a cross-section of everyone in our culture. But, while the patients I have worked with have often been Western, white, and middle class, I have been lucky enough to work with people who have come from Burma to Barbados, who have been from their twenties to their seventies, and who have come from many different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

More than fear, the two fundamental features of women's sexuality in our time are *ignorance* and *shame*. That is, women's experiences are constructed and colored by ignorance and shame. This coexists with the fact that sexuality is given tremendous importance in our social norms. The societal message is that you *have* to be sexual, you have to *want* to be sexual, you have to be *good* at being sexual, and you have to be *normally* sexual. Yet there are no traditions of sexual coaching, masturbation training, or honest feedback between partners, and there are no places to go to get all your questions answered by a friendly expert. I and clinicians like me have *become* that friendly expert, which is ridiculous when you consider the cost, unavailability, and medical context of psychotherapy.

Nor will sex therapy be included in the basic benefit package under managed care.¹ Perhaps that would be all right if better sex education

* This article was adapted from a speech given at The Sex Panic: A Conference on Women, Censorship, and "Pornography," May 7-8, 1993.

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1. President Clinton's proposed health-care legislation includes limited coverage for psychotherapy services as well as physical, occupational, or speech therapy to restore skills lost from illness or injury. However, services not considered medically necessary or appropriate are not covered by the plan. See *Full Text From President Clinton's Health Reform Package, The "Health Security Act," and Summary of Key Changes From*

existed or there were less pressure to be sexual. As it stands, however, much of sex therapy is remedial sex education that should have occurred during childhood and adolescence. Too much effort goes toward the untwisting of inhibitions that should never have taken root in the first place. In fact, a great deal of sex therapy focuses on expressing and undoing feelings of undesirableness, badness, and dirtiness. Many people are raised with the religious or cultural message that the body and its feelings and pleasures are dangerous and dirty. As a consequence, most women are, at best, ambivalent about their bodies.

It is easy for politicians or the media to play on these early negative feelings. Then, when the public condemns pornography, although the arguments seem to rely on scientific research or moral principles, I often see just the projection of those internalized feelings of shame and dirt that were taught at an early age. Given this perspective, let me now turn specifically to the issues of pornography, women's sexuality, and censorship. Today, I want to offer five concrete reasons why restricting explicit expressions of sexuality actually harms women.

1. Empowerment, not protection, is the route to women's sexual development. I read in the newspaper that tomorrow, on Mother's Day, the Rev. Calvin Butts is going to show his respect for women by taking dozens of CDs of rap songs that insult women into the street and running over them with a truck.² I think this is an empty gesture. If Reverend Butts wants to increase the respect shown toward women, he needs to increase the power that women hold, not try to "protect" them by riding in on a big truck (do I hear echoes of the knight in shining armor?) and whisking away the danger. He should preach, for example, that respecting women means giving them, and men, information and skill about safer sex practices that will prevent HIV transmission.³ Or, if he wants to make his point dramatically, he should go on a hunger strike to demand that the federal government research a female-controlled method of protection

Earlier Draft, BNA Daily Report for Executives, Oct. 28, 1993, available on Westlaw, BNA-DER file; see also *A New Framework for Health Care*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 14, 1993, at 4A3.

2. Reverend Butts had planned to drive a steamroller over a pile of tapes and compact discs featuring rap music that he considered offensive. However, a group of counterdemonstrators jeered and waved placards as Butts boarded the steamroller, so, rather than confront them, Butts and his supporters merely stomped on the tapes and CDs. See Pamela Newkirk, *Demonstrators Dump on Rap Music*, N.Y. NEWSDAY, June 6, 1993, at 3. Butts' stated goal was to "get some of the garbage, some of the vulgarity, out of" rap music. Pamela Newkirk, *Rap's Bad Rap: Butts' Protest Divides Blacks*, N.Y. NEWSDAY, May 22, 1993, at 3.

3. HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the etiologic agent of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). STEDMAN'S MEDICAL DICTIONARY 1720 (25th ed. 1990).

from HIV so women can protect themselves from AIDS. Protect yourself with information, power and skill—that will get you respect.

2. If we accept that women's sexuality has been shaped by ignorance and shame, and is just beginning to find new opportunities for expression, now is exactly the wrong time even to think about campaigning for the suppression of sexual expression. Suppressing pornography will harm women who are struggling to develop their own sexualities. History teaches us that *any* crackdown on sexuality always falls hardest on the experimental and on women. Small presses that publish sexual material and individual artists who work with sexual themes lack both the money and the time for endless legal disputes. Bookstores will close; performers will go hungry. Sex educators, if any are left, will be too intimidated to teach more than the blandest facts of genital plumbing. Legal restrictions on explicit sexual expression will drive erotic experimentation underground, which will deprive most women of access to unconventional inputs to their erotic imagination. As a consequence, women will feel that old, familiar shame when they confront any but the most mainstream sexual concept. They will be unable to break free from their historic repression.

Now is the time for more experimentation, not shame-soaked restraint. I am talking about freedom for new sexual science and art, freedom for new ideas about desire and pleasure, and freedom for new sexual practices—all of which will steer us clear of the ruts worn by centuries of religious inhibition, fear of pregnancy and disease, and compulsory heterosexuality.

What is clear to the sex therapist and sex educator is that no new kind of sexual behavior or feeling for women can occur at all without an environment of *open talk* about sexual possibilities and real experiences. And there will be no open talk if every seedling effort is met by religious disapproval, talkshow or media ridicule, or scientific neglect. Ridicule and accusations of harm are a powerful barrier against the emergence of new sexual forms. Shame and accusations of abnormality guarantee inhibition. For example, I often hear clients complain, "Why do they need to do that? My husband and I have been getting along just fine for thirty-five years, and we would never do that!" But breaking free from the historic limitations on female sexuality is just an idyllic fantasy without information, ideas, and images that are freely available.

3. Suppressing pornography harms women because it deprives them of learning more about the human imagination. Anti-pornography feminists

argue that pornography must be interpreted literally.⁴ Thus, if a picture shows a woman being fucked while lying across three tall stools in a coffee shop, that picture must have been made only to glorify the state of a woman being uncomfortable and unhappy. But that is not the way sexual fantasy actually works. If that is what you think, you do not know much about the human imagination! Let me give you a little illustration.

I have a patient who came to me because she experienced no sexual pleasure with her husband to whom she had been married for four years. Every story is complicated, but to boil hers down, some of the reasons for this state of affairs had to do with her religious upbringing, which emphasized sexual shame and conflict; the compulsive and perfectionist attitudes she learned from her immaculately clean mother; her aversion toward her tyrannical father; her obsession with her weight; and her choice of a husband for reasons which did not include finding him attractive. (You may think, "Good grief, what a mess," but given the current state of families, religion, and how we are raised in this society, this situation is not uncommon.)

This woman did receive some sexual pleasure when she masturbated, however, although this was diminished by her shame over the sexual fantasy she had developed. In her fantasy, she was the unhappy provider of sexual excitement to a group of leering men in a seedy living room. She danced naked, enticed them to undress, fondled them, and provided fellatio around the room. Although in the fantasy she was repulsed by the scene, in real life she would become excited and masturbate to orgasm. However interlarded with shame and confusion, her fantasy gave her a sense of pleasure and mastery.

This kind of story is more common than I can tell you, and it illustrates the paradoxes women often find themselves in today. Is it correct to interpret this woman's fantasy as the sick self-expression of a woman who had been degraded, humiliated, and subjugated in real life? No. Such a simple-minded assessment does not accurately characterize the meanings her fantasy held for her. This woman felt aroused by the sexual power she possessed while she danced and stimulated the men. They were turned on; they wanted her. She felt irresistible, and this feeling gratified

4. In a typically hyperbolic expression of this viewpoint, Andrea Dworkin has written that

for men, the right to abuse women is elemental, the first principle, with no beginning . . . and with no end plausibly in sight. . . . Pornography is the holy corpus of men who would rather die than change. Dachau brought into the bedroom and celebrated . . . Pornography reveals that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting; that sexual fun and sexual passion in the privacy of the male imagination are inseparable from the brutality of male history.

ANDREA DWORKIN, *PORNOGRAPHY: MEN POSSESSING WOMEN* 68-69 (1989).

her. In its own way, her fantasy was very sexually empowered. The vicissitudes of her upbringing and our misogynist culture, however, added negative elements to it—the undesirable setting and partners, the lack of her own arousal in the fantasy—and powerfully symbolized the fact that she did not feel entitled to enjoy anything openly. This was exactly what was going on with her husband. Ellen Willis has said that “women have learned . . . to be adept at shaping male fantasies to their own purposes,”⁵ and I think this woman’s story is a good example. In another place and time, she would have expressed her sexual conflict in a different way.

The point is that pornography is about fantasy and the identification with characters in stories as symbols, and you cannot understand pornography’s content or function on a literal level. If pornography is suppressed, women will not learn things about themselves and their imaginations that they could have learned through experimenting with, and reflecting on, their reactions to pornography.

4. Suppressing pornography and the production of sexual images will directly harm women who make their living in the many segments of the sex industry—prostitutes and sexual performers. These women have appealed to feminists for support, not rejection. The more that work in the sex industry is made antisocial and illegal, the more it goes underground, and the more the women who work in it are subject to abuse and oppression. Improved working conditions for these women will come from decriminalization, destigmatization, mutual support, and public pressure, not from being pushed underground and out of sight. Workers in the sex industry, like all women, are striving for economic survival and a decent life, and if feminism means anything, it means sisterhood and solidarity with women who are working toward self-determination.

5. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, suppressing explicit sexual materials will harm women by strengthening the power of the religious right. Because the goal of the religious right is the destruction of women’s freedom, this must be resisted at all costs. The religious right, whose patriarchal agenda is to enforce traditional sexual values, activities, and gender roles, rejects pornography largely, I believe, because of its connection to masturbation and sexual autonomy. In fact, the debate about pornography is in large part a debate about masturbation. I propose that the reason no one talks about women’s use of or interest in pornography lies in the widespread cultural discomfort with the idea of women masturbating.

Before I go on, let me add another disclaimer, which has to do with a normative problem that people in my business often encounter.

5. Ellen Willis, *Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography*, 38 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 351, 352 (1993).

Whenever we talk about sexual specifics, it is often wrongly assumed that we are talking in a normative way: that this is good practice, and that is a bad one, or that this is a healthy one, and that is a sick one.

Am I saying that masturbation is good, or am I saying that it is bad? Neither. Both. It all depends! It's not a meaningful question! All I *am* saying is that parts of life are connected to one another and to social values, and that practices have consequences. If you want to have a long and lively sexual life (and *believe me I do not care* whether you do or do not want to), you need to practice, and you need to learn. Masturbation is a form of learning and practice, which is known in every culture. It is a hobby, and like many hobbies it can be practiced frequently, or rarely.

I am always amazed by people who want to have exciting and gratifying sex, but who think it just comes "naturally," without practice or knowledge. I am sorry, but you cannot play Rachmaninoff without putting in a lot of practice. Now, if you only want to have a little bit of sex in your life, or you do not really care that much about it, then fine, that is okay, and masturbation is of much less relevance or importance. With that said, if I can just talk about masturbation as a practice without being heard to favor or disfavor it in particular contexts, we can go back to the religious right, pornography, and masturbation.

The religious right opposes autonomous sexuality for women. Sexuality for them exists only for procreation and to serve the family. Masturbation, or individual sexuality, is a threat. The right wants to return women to the years before the women's movement demanded and won the right to abortion, contraception, mandatory sex education, equal educational opportunities, accessible day care, and women's health centers. Picking on pornography to "protect" women attacks women's independence, and masturbation is an important subtext. I believe that supporting women's sexuality requires supporting (though not mandating) both women's masturbation and the availability of explicit sexual materials of every kind.

Shame and ignorance make cowards of us all, but now is no time for cowardice about women's sexual practices or imaginings. Censorship, even of pornography, harms women because women need sexual empowerment, not sexual protection. Anti-pornography campaigns say that pornography gives men power.⁶ In fact, men already have power. Explicit sexual materials and performances can contribute to women's sexual

6. See, e.g., DWORKIN, *supra* note 4, at 203 ("The sexual colonization of women's bodies is a material reality: men control the sexual and reproductive uses of women's bodies. The institutions of control include . . . pornography"); CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, *TOWARD A FEMINIST THEORY OF THE STATE* 197 (1989) ("Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be. Pornography is that way.").

power. If you do not like the ones you see, the solution is simple: avoid them.

Better yet, make ones you do like.

