Beyond Pornography: From Defensive Politics to Creating a Vision

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Feminist author and organizer Kathleen Barry was active in Women's Movement demonstrations against Playboy magazine in the early seventies. She has worked this past year on a book entitled Female Sexual Slavery (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), in which she discusses the interconnection of pornography, the enslavement of women, and other forms of sexual violence. This paper was the opening speech at the 1978 Feminist Perspectives on Pornography conference in San Francisco.

Pornography is a logical and necessary issue for feminists. It is the media of sexual objectification and violence against women. It abstracts those practices to a level of symbolic representation and presents them to the society at large as entertainment in books, pictures, and movies. As a collective representation of sexual objectification and violence against women, pornography differs from other feminist issues like rape or wife-battery, which are specific acts against individual women. The feminist response to pornography calls for some different solutions and some new strategies and actions.

Pornography is both more visible and less tangible than the individual acts of sexual violence perpetrated by rapists, wife-beaters, incest aggressors, or pimps. While feminists can respond to wife-battery and rape with legal action and by opening crisis centers and refuge shelters, we cannot rely on self-help measures in confronting pornography, whose victims are not only individual women but all women. The public support we slowly cultivated against rape was the result of making visible the individual acts of sexual violence. But pornography is already highly visible—on stands in neighborhood grocery stores as well as on marquees of movie theaters. Its visibility is an indication of its social acceptance. Pornography has become a valid, legitimate institution, neither condemned nor supported by
the law. The use of women as sexual objects is so pervasive as to be generally accepted as a normal representation of women. Such conditions constitute what I have called the ideology of cultural sadism (see *Female Sexual Slavery*), an ideology that permeates thinking and attitudes so deeply that its consequences (in the practice of sadism or masochism, for example) are assumed to be to some degree normal if not biologically determined.

For feminists, taking on the issue of pornography means challenging the very ideals of a sexually exploitative society. Our challenges threaten the sexual values promoted by masculinist ideology. In so doing, we are confronting the sexist double standard which, while legally condemning acts of sexual violence, in fact ideologically validates them in media such as pornography.

The challenge we face with the issue of pornography is compounded by the fact that unlike specific acts of violence to women (like rape) pornography is a $4-billion-a-year industry protected, as it is controlled in part, by organized crime. The feminist challenge that demands redefining sexual values is also a direct threat to that economic vested interest.

As women's consciousness is raised as to the content and intent of pornography, we see a mounting rage that cannot and will not be controlled. That rage began to erupt ten years ago when, in the beginning of this wave of feminism, we first began to confront pornography and the media of sexual objectification and violence. Those early demonstrations against *Playboy* and other sexually exploitative empires sparked considerable energy among feminists. But the tide of opinion was organized against us. The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography was but one of many groups to insist that there was no relationship between pornography and behavior, and to assert that trying to control pornography would only result in threatening freedom of speech. Liberal tactics were effective then, and we withdrew from the issue. But our rage has been seething ever since.

In the last ten years we have acquired considerable knowledge about the strategies of anti-feminists. We now recognize that, in one feminist issue after another, the attempts to silence us follow a very definite pattern. Our own recent history: How we began to address the issues, the opposition we faced, and how we responded are important to recall and can be instructive now.

Ten years ago abortion and rape were words that were rarely used. They were considered private problems, invisible as issues and silenced in women. But as feminism has addressed each of these issues,
we have moved beyond immobilizing silence into action, beyond our original defensiveness to burning issues of sexual politics. (The fact that we are still fighting for freedom from forced motherhood and freedom from rape is a testimonial not to our failure but to the deep entrenchment of those practices in society.)

We introduced abortion as a feminist issue while it was still illegal across the country. We educated the public as to the urgency of that issue through the personal testimony of women who had been victims of butcher-abortionists; we took our cause to the public, to the streets, to the legislatures, to the courts. As we documented the loss of women's lives through desperate attempts to self-abort or at the hands of butcher-abortionists, we were told, as we are now told, that we are the ones who are trying to destroy life. We were called murderers and were asked just where do we draw the line. (It is interesting that that question was being asked by the very people who were giving us a right-to-life argument while they were also campaigning for the death penalty—not a minor contradiction.) *

In those early abortion campaigns, the issue was not our opposition's concern over the right to life any more than it is now. They charged us then with destroying the right to life, using this as a tactic to intimidate us. Their goal was to send us back home, to silence us. Our campaign for women's control over our own bodies, for our right to live free from forced motherhood, was and continues to be what the "friends of the fetus" wanted to destroy. I think that as a movement they are sometimes more aware than we of the potential female power that would be unleashed if we achieved self-determination.

Our opposition's strategies were the same some years later when we took on the issue of rape. Feminists are continuing to demand recognition of rape victims by the courts and the general public as victims of sexual assault. In demanding that the courts treat victims as victims and not as criminals, we campaigned for laws that would prohibit extensive probing into the sexual lives and characters of the victims. Again we are accused of trespassing on someone else's rights, this time the rights of the defendant.

Every time we fight for a basic human right for ourselves, a right that should be ours simply because we exist, we are told that we are

* Ed. Note: At the June 1978 National Right-to-Life convention, a few dissenter tried to get the "right-to-life" people to adopt antinuclear and antideath-penalty platforms. They were rebuffed on the grounds that "unborn life is perfect, whereas born life is imperfect"—according to the Women's Action Alliance.
infringing on someone else’s rights—that we are morally corrupt for wanting a decent life, control over our own destinies, and freedom from exploitation and violence. We must recognize this as a patriarchal tactic to keep us on the defensive—to intimidate us, to send us home, to silence us.

Through it all we have not given up; our rage has not been suppressed. Our passion for our own liberation has always overcome intimidation. The increasing numbers of women who are pouring into the streets for Take Back the Night demonstrations across the country and the increasing reports of feminist disruptions of pornography movies or harassment of pornography bookstores indicate that our opposition’s tactics have failed.

Some cautions and strategies in addressing the pornography issue are suggested from our experience with other issues. The male vested interest that is mobilized to protect both the economic profits and sexual power derived from pornography is never expressed directly in their tactics. Pornography perpetrators do not tell us to back off because we will hurt their profits or destroy their power. Instead, they hire batteries of lawyers and charge us with eroding constitutional guarantees to freedom of speech. The ideology of cultural sadism has convinced many that the Constitution should be used to protect the vile misogynistic hatred of women perpetuated in pornography, and that we should not inhibit pornographers’ “freedom of speech.” We are now warned that should we demand the elimination of pornography and attempt to use legal power to accomplish this, we will be giving our oppressors the power to oppress us further by setting legal precedents which will be used to inhibit our freedom of speech.

Looking at this argument, we should recognize two things: (1) They oppress us already, and (2) our freedom of speech has already been effectively curtailed. Our voices are silenced through the sexual terrorism that dominates our lives, a terrorism that stems directly from pornography. But, most important, we must challenge abuses of power in every instance of their occurrence and not expect that those who hold power over us will deal with us generously or even equitably in terms of the rights they assume for themselves.

Each time we achieve some gain for our sex, we experience a resurgence of anti-feminism. Shortly after the Supreme Court decision removing legal prohibition of abortion, we were faced with an escalation in the forced sterilization of poor and ethnic minority women as well as denial of abortion to the poor. Those reactionary practices
mean that the backlash forces us to deeper levels of challenge and confrontation; they do not mean that we should not have challenged state abortion laws. We have learned in one issue after another that one victory usually leads to a backlash and therefore requires continued uncompromised confrontation. There are no easy roads to liberation.

In addition to our opposition's attempt to redefine the issue of pornography to one of freedom of speech, the burden of proof has been placed on us to come up with the evidence that pornography affects behavior or causes sexual violence. There have been volumes and volumes of research on pornography that attempt to deny any causal connection between pornography and rape or other forms of sexual violence. While I have analyzed the ideological bias that guided and directed that research in my book, I submit that the causal connections between pornography and sexual violence are perfectly evident. We do not need to follow individual men out of specific pornographic theaters and witness them raping the first woman they see to realize as women what impact pornography has on our lives. We need only appeal to our own common sense.

The fact that it took the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography several million dollars, several years, and several volumes of research to try to disprove what is self-evident and can be derived from common sense is a testimonial to its ideological bias, sexist research, masculinist values. In the end the commission's work has little to do with the study of the relationship between pornography and behavior, and everything to do with its own protection of male vested interests.

It is said in radical circles that liberals are the ones who will hang you only a half inch from the ground. With that in mind, recall that sociologist Marvin Wolfgang was one of the two commissioners who issued a minority statement in The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography indicating that it did not go far enough in recommending the removal of any restrictions of adults' access to pornography. The commission called for the removal of all restrictions, noting that there was no evidence that pornography would be harmful to juveniles.

Now, almost ten years later, after a drastic escalation in pornography, an increase in rape, a proliferation of rings that buy and sell children for pornography—in short, after thousands of women and children have suffered the assault of sexual terrorism and violence as a result (in part) of the legitimization that Wolfgang and his colleagues gave to pornography—after all that, Time magazine
(August 27, 1979) reports that Marvin Wolfgang may have had a change of heart and that he may find a causal connection between pornography and sexual violence. It is our lives, our bodies, and those of our children that have paid the expense of that earlier liberal rhetoric.

It is costly for us to be diverted to false issues like freedom of speech or busy work (such as trying to prove through research what we already know through common sense). While we research, discuss, and debate the merits of each issue, pornography proliferates. The pornography empire will not be affected by our discussions. It will be altered by our actions.

Recently the Bay Guardian referred to Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media as “Laura Lederer and her humorless gang of women against everything.” Resorting to ridicule when other strategies fail, our opposition ultimately reveals a deep fear, a fear of what would happen to male power and what kind of society would result if we could establish a social order free from sexual exploitation and violence. They are not afraid of what we are against. They are afraid of what we are for. What we are for is so much more powerful than what we are against.

While hiking last summer, I had been thinking about why we’ve been so restrained in confronting the issue of pornography. One morning after hiking up from a deep canyon that was very beautiful but dark and overhung with trees, I came out onto open rock. Feeling the warmth and glow of the sun, I turned to look behind me and saw an incredible expanse of mountains. The sun was coming up over them, gilding their edges. I was overwhelmed with their majesty. At that moment I realized that if we are going to destroy the effects of pornography on our lives and in our society we must start thinking bigger. We must each be able to visualize on a grand scale what it is that we want for ourselves and for our society. As we bring our visions together, we will coalesce our battle with a vision that is beyond the negation of what is.

Would you try now to think of what it would be like to live in a society in which we are not daily, every minute, bombarded with sexual violence? Would you try to visualize what it would be like to go to the movies and not see it, to be able to walk home and not be afraid of it, to be able to walk through the drugstore and not view it? We have a right to that kind of society, to that kind of life. But we can only achieve it by creating a vision of what we want and fighting for it. If we set that as our goal and demand nothing less, we will not stop fighting until we’ve achieved it.