

Pornography and Sexual Abuse of Women¹

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With the growing visibility and influence of the women's movement, the subject of pronography and its effect on sexual abuse of women has received renewed attention. (See Lederer's 1980 edited collection of readings on the topic.) Of the published materials on pronography and sex abuse, there is a sizable literature which found no relationship between pronography and sex crimes. Most famous of these is the 1970 report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, which concluded that its "empirical investigation provided no evidence that exposure to or use of explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of social or individual harm" (Barnes, 1970).

The Kronhausens (1959) believed that not only was pornography not harmful, it may actually be beneficial: "Instead of the comic magazines, or even hardcore pornography causing sex murders or other criminal acts, it is far more likely that these unholy instruments may be more often than not a safety valve of the sexual deviant and potential sex offender." This "catharsis model" of pornography was experimentally tested a decade and a half later. Howard et al. (1973), exposed 23 subjects to pornographic materials for 90 min per day for 15 days, and concluded that exposure to pornography had no detrimental effect on the subjects and actually led to a steadily decreasing interest. Even before Ho-

¹ This research was sponsored through the Delancey Street Foundation by the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, National Institute of Mental Health, Grant Number RO1 MH 32782, Mimi H. Silbert, Principal Investigator. We would like to thank Teri Lynch, Auristela Frias, JoAnn Mancuso, Charlotte Martin, and Alice Watson for their assistance in developing the instrument and in collecting the data.

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ward and his colleagues, Mosler (1971) found that after viewing erotic movies, "sex-calloused males" showed some decrease in their "sex-calloused" attitudes. It should be noted, however, that the movies used by Mosler were erotic rather than hardcore pornography. This brings up one of the problems in the literature on pornography; often the difficult distinction is not made between what is violent pornography and what is erotic.

One of the most influential demonstrations of the catharsis model of pornography is no doubt the Danish experience. Kutchinski (1973), in his review of the Danish experience, reported that, with the increased availability of pornography in Denmark there were marked decreases in the number of sex offenses committed there. Thus, he argued that making pornography readily available gave the public a safety outlet for their psyches. It should be noted that Kutchinski's argument has been challenged by such scholars as Diane Russell (1980).

Additionally, Kant (1976) reported the results of a study by Savitz and Johnson, who interviewed 60 prisoners serving time for sex crimes, and compared them to a control sample of 133 nonfelons in terms of exposure to pornography. They concluded that the fear that increasing exposure to erotic materials would twist people's minds, lead to depravity, and encourage sex crimes, is a groundless fear, and that some exposure to pornography may be salutary. They found that pornography could not be shown to trigger any identifiable, specific forms of sexual deviance. For example, they found that rapists and child molesters saw less pornography as teenagers than the noncriminals in the control group. Similarly, Pacht and his colleagues (1962) concluded from their 9-year study that "it clearly did not support the contention that pre-adolescent and adolescent exposure to pornography contributes to the later commitment of sex offenses."

In contrast to the sizable literature suggesting that pornography is cathartic and, thus, not only not harmful but at times even beneficial, there is a growing body of literature supporting an "imitation model" of pornography. Writers implicitly or explicitly adhering to this model assume that men viewing violent pornography imitate the abusing males in those materials, and believe that the victims must enjoy the abuse. For example, Schultz (1971) interviewed severely violent sex offenders, and found that invariably they were extensive viewers of pornography from a very young age. Half the men Schultz interviewed told her that pornography played a definite part in their crimes, either by arousing them, or by actually teaching them what to do, or both. The emphasis on the deviant norm: cruelty, perversion, bestiality, and the like, in sex material so readily available, was influential in their sex-linked crimes.

Gager and Schurr (1976) similarly concluded, from reviewing police records, that a distinguishable relationship exists between pornography and the method of operation of sex criminals. The methods graphically portrayed in pornographic materials usually involve the violent and aberrant behavior in which

females were both willing and unwilling participants, with explicit descriptions of brutality and abuse of females, were duplicated in the sex offenders' *modus operandi*. They say this pattern translated again and again into sexual assault. "Probably the single most-used cry of rapist to victim is, 'you bitch . . . slut . . . you know you want it . . . you all want it.'"

Research conducted by Feshbach and Malanutt (1978) documented that college men who viewed pornography that fused sex and violence tended to be more sexually aroused by the idea of rape and less sympathetic to the victim, than a control group. This same point was made by Donnerstein (1980). Donnerstein stated that, in researching the effect of pornography on aggression, "we found that when male subjects view aggressive erotic films, in which the woman is a victim of aggression, that even without angering the subjects, we will get increases in aggression against a female." In the same article, Abel, a Columbia University psychiatrist who studies rapists, states "it's a depiction of woman as victim and man as aggressor, and I think as long as these types of depictions continue, they serve as models for both aggressors and victims of aggressors."³

More and more research is beginning to document a correlation between exposure to representation of violence and the commitment of violent acts generally (for example, the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, concluded in 1969 that, on the basis of its research, media violence can induce a person to act violently). And more specifically, research is documenting a correlation between exposure to pornographic materials, and the committing of sexually abusive or violent acts, particularly against women. (See, for example, Bronsonbrenner, 1970, Bart & Jozsa, 1980; Diamond, 1980; Eysenck & Nias, 1978; Goldstein et al., 1973; Russell, 1980.)

Russell (1980) asked a random sample of 933 women the following question. "Have you ever been upset by anyone trying to do what they had seen in pornographic pictures, movies, or books?" Ten percent of the subjects responded affirmatively. In these cases in which the women were personally victimized by pornography, the men tried to use pornography to get them to do what they wanted. Pornography also may have reinforced and legitimized these acts. In some cases, the actual idea of doing certain acts appeared to have come from pornographic materials. Jones (1980) interviewed battered women who killed their husbands after years of having been abused. He became convinced of the correlation between pornography and violence against women, because of the recurrent theme of pornography in the stories of abuse.

³On the other hand, Abel also stated he has seen patients, rapists, and child molesters who use pornography to cool off their sexual arousals, who report that it is less likely than that they carry out the crime. Abel makes the important point that such depictions do different things at different times to different people.

Steiner (1973) wrote, "There may be deeper difficulties than we as yet understand because of the total freedom of the uncensored erotic imagination and the total freedom of the sadist. That these two freedoms may have emerged in close historical proximity may not be coincidence."

Brownmiller (1975) saw the philosophy of pornography as one and the same as that of rape. She argued that the open display of pornography promotes a climate in which acts of sexual hostility against women are not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged. Similarly, Robin Morgan (1980) wrote of "the theory and practice: pornography and rape."

Longino (1980) claimed that the tolerance of pornographic representations of rape, bondage, and torture of women helps to create and maintain a climate more tolerant of the actual physical abuse to women. Pornography, especially violent pornography, is implicated in the committing of crimes of violence against women.

Closely related to the subject of the relationship between pornography and sexual abuse of women, is the subject of sexual abuse of children in pornography.

The California Attorney General Advisory Committee on Obscenity and Pornography (August 16, 1977) reported that "law enforcement authorities throughout the state are convinced that a direct relationship exists between pornographic literature and molestation of young children." Aside from use for personal gratification, evidence indicates that it is also used by child molesters to arouse their victims and to persuade very young children that such behavior is permissible. Rush (1980) wrote, "Actual living examples of a connection between criminal sexual assault against children and pornography are too frequent to ignore. Police records throughout the country carry accounts of adult men and of juvenile offenders who have been found with pornographic material either on their persons, in their cars, or in their rooms. Social workers, District Attorneys, and police officers are consistently making connections between sexual assaults against children and pornography."

In 1977, a surge of articles appeared in popular magazines, describing the sexual exploitation of minors in pornographic materials. For example: "The Children's Garden of Perversity," and "Young Lolitas" (both published in *Time Magazine*, 1977), "Child Pornography: Outrage Starts to Stir Some Action" (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1977), "Child Pornography: Is the Issue First Amendment Freedom?" (*Washington Star*, 1977), "Kid Porn: Is It the Nadir of Man's Depravity?" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1977).

The *U.S. News and World Report* article, for example, describes child pornography as an enterprise grossing more than half a billion dollars per year. Both Densen-Gerber (1978) and Lloyd (1976) reported that, each month, there are at least 264 different magazines being produced and sold in adult book stores that

deal with sexual acts between children or between children and adults. Each one of these magazines is reported to cost an average of \$7.00. It was estimated by Ditkoff (1978) that 1.2 million children are used annually in commercial sex (prostitution and/or pornography).

The wide attention given to the problem of child pornography brought quick action by legislatures. (It may be worth noting that such has not been the case for adult women's pornography.) In fact, as noted by Weisenberg et al. (1979), the knowledge about the sexual exploitation of minors in pornographic materials stems largely from either reports in the popular literature, or testimonials given during the public hearings which led to legislation relating to child pornography (for example, the Senate subcommittee hearings leading to passage of the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act in 1977). Since early 1978, more than 30 state legislatures have introduced or passed child pornography legislation. Congress has also completed work on a Federal statute dealing with the issue (Densen-Gerber, 1978). There were numerous publications dealing with legislation and laws regarding child pornography (see, for example, Fox, 1978; Heinrich, 1978; Kaminer, 1980; Longino, 1980; Smith, 1978; Weisenberg et al., 1979; Yeamans, 1980).

Child pornography as a rapidly growing industry was described in many publications (Baker, 1978; Casey, 1978; Densen-Gerber, 1978; Gager & Schurr, 1976; Rush, 1980). Casey (1978), for example, noted that pornographic abuse of children takes different forms: use of children in pornographic films and magazines, use of pornographic materials by adults to persuade children to participate in sexual acts, and the taking of sexually explicit photographs of children for financial gain and/or the personal gratification of the photographer.

In 1978, Lowen, summarizing the literature on child pornography, concluded that "the literature on prostitution and pornography is primarily descriptive in nature. Historical narrative, case studies, and moralistic essays dominate the available publications. No evaluative research has been published on juveniles involved in pornography" (p. 11). Similarly, Weisenberg et al. (1979), after surveying the literature on the topic, concluded that, since little research has been conducted on the juveniles who participate in child pornography, the short- and long-term psychological effects of this form of sexual abuse are unknown.

The present study did not attempt to study either the effects of violent pornography on sexual assailants, or the use of juveniles in child pornography. The study was aimed at studying sexual abuse of street prostitutes both prior to and following entrance into prostitution. Yet, as it happens in every large research project, especially an exploratory research, some unexpected information emerged, important information, that unfortunately was not studied in a systematic manner, but which was significant enough to report. Such information is almost always qualitative in nature, and the result of initially unsolicited com-

ments by the subjects. When such comments are repeated often enough, they begin to serve as the basis for a statement that can later be formed into specific hypotheses to be directly studied in future research.

Such was the case in the present study with regard to the relationship between sexual abuse and pornography. From the detailed descriptions the subjects provided to open-ended questions in regard to incidents of juvenile sexual assault in their childhood and to incidents of rape following their entrance into prostitution, it became clear that there is a relationship between violent pornography and sexual abuse in the experience of street prostitutes.

METHOD

Subjects

Two-hundred juvenile and adult, current and former, women street prostitutes in the San Francisco Bay area participated in the study. The average age was 22. The youngest subject was 10 and the oldest was 46. Seventy percent of the current prostitutes were under 21, almost 60% were 16 or under, and many were 10, 11, 12, and 13 years old. Sixty-nine percent of the subjects were white, 18% were black, 11% were Hispanic, 2% were American Indian, and 1% Asian. Sixty-eight percent were single and never married, 14% divorced, 6% separated, and 2% widowed. Only 10% were either married or living under common law. The average financial situation of the subjects was "just making it"; 42% described themselves as very poor, 31% as just making it, 12% as average, 12% as comfortable, and 3% as very wealthy.

Instrument

A specially designed "Sexual Assault Experiences Questionnaire" written by the authors was used as the survey instrument. The questionnaire had four parts: (1) background information including demographic variables, home background, social support systems, and prostitution history, (2) various forms of assault experienced by the subjects including physical and sexual assault that is job related and sexual assault (in this case completed rape) that is not job related, (3) history of juvenile sexual exploitation prior to becoming a prostitute, and (4) self-concept, plans for the future, and recommendation for an ideal program of intervention for prostitutes who are victims of sexual assault.

Procedure

The "Sexual Assault Experiences Questionnaire" was individually administered to the subjects in sessions that lasted anywhere from 2-4 hr. Questions

posed by the interviewers were coded directly onto categories on the questionnaire during the course of the interview; responses were also tape recorded and transcribed. Each interviewer reviewed the questionnaire immediately following the interview for 2 hr to verify coding and include material there was not time enough to write during the interview.

Interviewers were members of the Delancey Street Foundation, a self-help residential facility well known for its successful treatment of prostitutes, criminals, and drug addicts. The fact that the interviewers reflected the makeup of the sample population maximized their credibility with the subjects (who, in general tend to be distrustful of the "straight world") and their understanding of the jargon terms and lifestyle issues.

RESULTS

The study generated an enormous amount of data, quantitative as well as qualitative, documenting stunning amounts of sexual abuse of street prostitutes as part of their job, outside of their work environment, and in their childhood prior to entering prostitution.⁴ Many of the open descriptions of these sexual assaults made reference to the role played by pornography. These references were unsolicited by the interviewers. Since the relationship between sexual abuse and pornography was unexpected, no questions addressed it directly. Only after the data collection was completed, was the content from 193 cases of rape (reported by 73% of the women), and from 178 cases of juvenile sexual abuse (reported by 60% of the women), analyzed for any mentioned relationship between these incidents and pornography. Because these data are based on responses from victims, rather than research on sex offenders themselves, the results can neither confirm nor reject the "catharsis model" of pornography. The results do, however, lend considerable weight to the "imitation model" of pornography, as reviewed above.

Out of 193 cases of rape, 24% mentioned allusions to pornographic material on the part of the rapist. This figure is even more significant when it is understood that these comments were made by respondents without any solicitation, or reference to the issues of pornography by the interviewer. The comments followed the same pattern: the assailant referred to pornographic materials he had seen or read and then insisted that the victims not only enjoyed the rape but also the extreme violence. For example, the following is a typical comment reported

⁴ While the severity of on-the-job victimization of street prostitutes can be dismissed by professionals and lay people alike as occupational hazards (discussed in Silbert & Pines, 1982a), those rapes suffered which were totally unrelated to their work (discussed by Pines & Silbert at the Proceedings of the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, December 1981), and the childhood abuses which preceded entrance into prostitution cannot be so easily dismissed. (Childhood abuses are extensively discussed in Silbert & Pines, 1982b; Silbert & Pines, 1981).

by victims as one in which the assailant made reference to his prior use of pornography.⁵ "I know all about you bitches, you're no different; you're like all of them. I seen it in all the movies. You love being beaten" (He then began punching the victim violently). "I just seen it again in that flick. He beat the shit out of her while he raped her and she told him she loved it; you know you love it; tell me you love it." The assailant continued to beat and slap the woman while raping her, repeating his demand that she say that she loved it, just like the woman he saw in the movies. In the majority of cases, there were no distinctive features about the victims, their situations, or the factors of the rape, which could account for the assailants' mentioning their involvement with pornography. In 12% of the 193 cases of rape, the assailant mentioned his involvement with pornography as a response to the victim's telling the assailant she was a prostitute.

In 19% of the rape cases, the victims tried to stop the violence of the rape by telling the assailant that they were prostitutes. For example, "Calm down. I'm a hooker. Relax, and I'll turn you a free trick without all this fighting." Rather than assuage the violence, this assertion only exacerbated the problem; the assailants *increased* the amount of violence in every single case. They became furious at hearing the woman say she was a prostitute. Most started screaming, demanding that she take back what she had said, insisting on taking her by force. In order to reassert their own control, assailants then became extremely violent. In all 19% of the cases in which the victim told the rapist she was a prostitute, the victim sustained even more serious injuries than those prostitutes who did not disclose their prostitution status. This finding supports the contention that rape is an aggressive act motivated by a desire to establish the rapist's power over his victim, rather than a sexual act. When the victim told the assailant she was a prostitute and offered him sexual gratification, she was trying to assert some control over the situation, which is probably the reason for the excessive violence involved in those rapes, where the rapist insisted on imposing more power and aggression over the victim.

In 12% of the 193 cases, the victims who told the rapists that they were prostitutes not only received more violent abuse than those who didn't tell, but also elicited overt comments from the assailants related to pornography. (In most of the other cases in which victims told the rapists they were prostitutes, indirect references were made to pornography.) An analysis of the 12% of the cases in which victims disclosed they were prostitutes reveals that there is a pattern of response among the assailants to the disclosure. In hearing that their victims were prostitutes, the assailants responded in a manner characterized by the following four elements: (1) their language became more abusive, (2) they became significantly more violent, beating and punching the women excessively, often using weapons they had shown the women, (3) they mentioned having

⁵ The quotes were transcribed responses taped during the interview.

seen prostitutes in pornographic films, the majority of them mentioning specific pornographic literature, and (4) after completing the forced vaginal penetration, they continued to assault the women sexually in ways they claimed they had seen prostitutes enjoy in the pornographic literature they cited. For example, "After I told him I'd turn him a free trick if only he'd calm down and stop hurting me, then he just really blew his mind. He started calling me all kinds of names, and then started screaming and shrieking like nothing I'd ever heard." He sounded like a wailing animal. Instead of just slapping me to keep me quiet, he really went crazy and began punching me all over. Then he told me he had seen whores just like me in (three pornographic films mentioned by name), and told me he knew how to do it to whores like me. He knew what whores like me wanted . . . After he finished raping me, he started beating me with his gun all over. Then he said, 'You were in that movie. You were in that movie. You know you wanted to die after you were raped. That's what you want; you want me to kill you after this rape just like (specific pornography film) did.'" This particular woman suffered, in addition to forced vaginal penetration, forced anal penetration with a gun, excessive bodily injuries, including several broken bones; and a period of time in which the rapist held a loaded pistol at her vagina, threatening to shoot, insisting this was the way she had died in the film he had seen. He did not, in fact, shoot after all.

Similar results were found in regard to the subjects' experiences of juvenile sexual exploitation. Ten percent of the 200 respondents noted that they had been used as children in pornographic films and magazines. It is significant to note that these comments were made simply in open-ended descriptions of their lives; unfortunately, there were no specific questions on the survey instrument designed to elicit information about the juveniles' relationship to pornography. Therefore, it is assumed that the actual response to this question would be notably higher. All of the respondents who described being used in pornographic films and magazines were under the age of 13 when they were victimized in this way.

Again, in unsolicited comments, 22% of the 178 cases of juvenile sexual exploitation mentioned the use of pornographic materials by the adult prior to the sexual act. The particular manner in which the adult used the pornographic materials varied. For a few, they used the materials to try to persuade the children with comments such as, "Now doesn't that look like something that you and I would have a good time doing together? Come on look at that. Doesn't that make you want to come with me?" Others used pornographic materials to attempt to legitimize their actions. Several victims report that the abuser showed them pictures depicting children involved in sexual acts with adults to convince them that it was acceptable behavior and that it was something they wanted to do. These abusers stated, for example, "See the expression on her face; that's exactly how you look at me." Others used the pornographic materials to arouse themselves prior to abusing the child. For example, one of the subjects in the

study described a primitive movie projector her father had set up in the garage. He used to show himself and his friends pornographic movies to get them sexually aroused before they would rape her. (She was 9 at the time.) Her brother would also watch the movies when the father was gone; then he also abused her sexually.

Thirty-eight percent of the 200 women prostitutes interviewed reported that they had been involved in the taking of sexually explicit photographs of themselves when they were children for commercial purposes, and/or the personal gratification of the photographer. The subjects were under the age of 16 years old. It should be noted that while many of the descriptions were open-ended comments included in their stories, some were responses given to questions of how they earned a living once they ran away from home and before they began prostituting.

It is likely, given the numbers who spontaneously described their involvement with pornography, that the cases of pornographic abuse of children would be significantly higher among the prostitute population if studied overtly. Indeed, there is already some evidence indirectly supporting this contention. For example, Baker (1978) mentioned that several authorities have found a close relationship between child pornography and the practice of child prostitution. Rush (1980) mentioned that most runaways can survive only as prostitutes or by posing for pornography. It should be noted that 96% of the juveniles in the present study were runaways and poor, and that all of them were street prostitutes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is very difficult to establish conclusively the causal relationship between pornography and sexual abuse of women. Most of the research cited in the introduction is correlational and, thus, only supports an evident relationship between the two variables. In the present study, a detailed content analysis of the responses of 200 street prostitutes, describing sexual abuse in their background, documented a surprising amount of unsolicited references to pornography.

While the results of the data can neither confirm nor reject the "catharsis model" of pornography, because they are based on victims' rather than assailants' responses, nevertheless, the results lend considerable support to the "imitation model" of pornography. Many of the references to pornography noted by the subjects indicated that their abusers were imitating the abusing males in pornographic materials, and believed that, as the victims in pornography, their victims must enjoy the abuse.

It is important to remember that the study serving as a background for the present paper did not focus on the relationship between sexual abuse and pornography; rather, it was an exploratory study investigating sexual abuse of street

prostitutes. The reference to pornography was one of the unexpected findings generated by the study. What that means is that further research should replicate the present study, with a direct focus on pornography, and with both prostitute and nonprostitute samples. Further research is urgently needed in order to explore the amount of pornography related to sexual abuse of children, the process of the abuse, and its short and long-term effects. It is also important to study the relationship between pornography and all other forms of sexual abuse of women. Given the high prevalence of juvenile sexual abuse and rape among street prostitutes, which was well documented in the present study (Silbert & Pines, 1982a,b), it is suggested that they be the first group to be studied for a better understanding and documentation of the relationship between pornography and sexual abuse.

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