Pornography Objectifies Women

1. Women as Sex Objects

Pornography fosters the idea that the degradation of women is acceptable. Since males use pornography much more frequently than females, exposure to sexual and even semi-sexual material from the Internet, magazines, and television is associated with stronger notions that women are sex objects or sexual commodities. Men thus exposed are more likely to describe women in overtly sexual terms, rather than by other personal attributes.

2. Violence against Women

A study of widely distributed x-rated films by Gloria Cowan and colleagues, professors of psychology at California State University, San Bernardino, determined the range and extent of domination and sexual inequality depicted of women in a random selection of movies in family video rental stores in California. Physical aggression was present in 73 percent of the films, and rape scenes were present in 51 percent, with the woman as the victim every time. The films depicted gender-role inequalities as well, typically portraying the men as professionals and the women as school girls, secretaries, or housewives. During the sexual scenes, the man usually remained at least partially clothed, whereas the woman was usually naked.

3. Acceptance of Rape

After prolonged exposure to pornography, men especially, but also some women, trivialize rape as a lesser offense.

Similar results emerge in assessments of college men. Sarah Murnen of Kenyon College, Ohio found that fraternity members, who displayed many more pornographic pictures of women in their rooms than those from the non-fraternity group, had more positive attitudes toward rape.

Pornographic films also degrade women through “rape myth acceptance” scenes, which depict women being raped and ultimately enjoying the experience. These scenes foster the belief that women really “want” to be raped. Jeannette Norris of the University of Washington conducted a study in which a group of students read two versions of the same story depicting a woman being raped. The story, however, had two different endings: one version ended with the woman deeply distressed, the other ended with the woman seeming to enjoy herself. Even though the two stories were identical in every way except for the woman’s reaction at the end, the students viewed the scenario more positively when the story depicted the woman as enjoying the rape. They perceived the raped woman as having a greater “desire” to have sex and were thus more accepting of what the man had done.

4. Women’s View of Pornography
Women tend to view pornography as more degrading of women than men do. When a sample of students was asked about their feelings toward pornography, 72 percent of the young women but only 23 percent of the young men stated their feelings were negative. Moreover, when asked if pornography is degrading, almost 90 percent of young women but only 65 percent of young men agreed that pornography is degrading.

Whether they think pornography is degrading or not, women who view pornography regularly unwittingly engage in a form of self-degradation: they develop a negative body image about themselves because they do not measure up to the depictions in the pornographic materials.


This entry draws heavily from The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community.