



## Questions and challenges that presenters of the StopPornCulture slide show are likely to hear

After the formal presentation of the slide show, the presenter(s) typically lead a discussion. A number of common questions and challenges arise in those discussions. Here are some that we hear most frequently, with suggestions for how to answer them.

### **How can we criticize pornography when the women who perform choose to be involved? Why are you condemning those women?**

The feminist anti-pornography movement has never condemned the women in the industry for their choices. Instead, we recognize that many of those women choose under a variety of constraints. Research on women in the sexual-exploitation industries (prostitution, pornography, stripping) suggests that a disproportionate percentage were sexually abused as children, which often leads women to see their primary value as providing sexual pleasure for men. Economic hardship and a perceived lack of options may be a factor for other women. In short, “choice” is a complicated issue. But beyond that, remember that pornography is an overwhelmingly male-run industry. Women may choose to enter the business, but they don’t decide the conditions under which they work. And they work in an industry whose clientele is overwhelmingly male. We believe it’s crucial to focus on the choices of the people in the system who have considerably more power—the men who produce and consume the bulk of the material.

### **That may be true, but if women would refuse to participate in the industry then there wouldn’t be a problem. Maybe we should be criticizing those women, who are making money off this.**

It’s easy to understand why women—who are the target of pornography’s relentless woman-hating—might be angry at what they’ve seen here. But is the solution to focus that anger on other women, who are relatively powerless in the equation? We’re all responsible for our choices, and no one is beyond critique. But we should think about why it’s so easy to direct so much of our anger at those women, many of whom already suffer a variety of psychological and physical injuries in the industry. And while a small number of women are financially successful in the industry, let’s remember that the profits from pornography flow largely to those who produce and distribute the material, not the performers. Channeling our anger at those women is a bit like blaming the minimum-wage workers at the McDonald’s or Burger King cash registers for the health and environmental problems caused by the fast-food industry.

### **Hasn’t there always been pornography? Why make such a big deal about this?**

No doubt humans have always tried to make sense of the mystery of sexuality, and that has included art—pictures, music, stories, poetry. But to conflate all attempts by people throughout time to explore sex with the contemporary pornography industry is simplistic and diversionary. The contemporary pornography industry isn’t interested in exploring sexuality—it is interested in profit. And in a patriarchal, capitalist society, that means images that exploit sexuality rather than explore it.

**Aren't the people who object to pornography really just afraid of sex?**

This is probably the most insulting claim that pornographers and their supporters make. The feminists who have committed their lives to the anti-pornography movement have been among the most articulate spokespeople for a progressive view of sexuality. These are the people who have done the most to help society move toward a more humane view of sexuality. To accuse them of being “anti-sex” is a cheap attempt to divert attention from pornography’s misogynistic and racist conception of sex that is fundamentally anti-human. We aren’t anti-sex—we’re anti-misogyny.

**Aren't more and more women buying and using pornography these days, almost as much as men? Doesn't that suggest pornography is more woman-friendly now?**

Yes, it’s clear that women’s use of pornography has increased somewhat in the past decade. But while the pornography industry would like us to believe that women like pornography as much as men, the vast majority of porn consumers are men—and the industry knows it. That’s why pornography continues to reflect the male sexual imagination that is dominant in the culture, and why it is so relentlessly misogynistic.

**Aren't men just more visually oriented than women? Isn't it natural for men to want and need pornography?**

Are there biological differences between men and women? Obviously, yes. Might some of those differences result in different understandings and experiences of sex? Perhaps. But we really don’t know much about these questions, and sweeping statements about how men and women—by nature—are so different should be treated with skepticism. Men and women are socialized so differently that any claims about our “nature” are at best speculative. Why not focus instead on what we do know and can control, which is the world we choose to build? And beyond all that, there’s an obvious question: Even if men were “naturally” more inclined to seek out sexual imagery, why would such material “naturally” be so misogynistic?

**Doesn't watching pornography make people more sexually inventive and adventurous, less hung-up about their sexuality? Doesn't pornography expand our imaginations?**

This is probably the most ridiculous claim that pornographers and their supporters make. If anything, the formulaic script of pornography shuts down rather than opens up people’s sexual imaginations. Pornography offers people a vision of sexuality rooted in men’s domination of women and women’s acceptance of their own degradation. It offers the same progression of sexual acts, ending in the same ejaculation onto a woman’s body or face, over and over again. This is inventive? Adventurous? Imaginative?

**The woman-hating is so blatant—that’s what is hard to understand and accept. Why do men like these kinds of things?**

That question takes us beyond the issue of pornography to the fundamental way in which this culture defines masculinity. The feminist movement has never claimed that this sexuality of cruelty and contempt is just the way men are—by nature, with no hope of change. Instead, we focus on the way men are socialized into a masculinity based on conquest and control, which can lead to relationships with women based on domination and denigration. How can so many men be satisfied with a definition of themselves that is so devoid of any real humanity? The truth is, while many men accept these things, few are truly satisfied. The short-term reward—the sexual excitement—doesn't provide the deeper meaning that almost all human beings need and seek.

**My husband/boyfriend uses pornography, and at times he's asked me to watch with him. It's hard enough just to tell him I won't do that. How am I supposed to confront him about his own pornography use? I can imagine how angry he'll get.**

It's never easy to recognize that the men we love may be more committed to a certain kind of masculinity and a certain kind of sexual pleasure than they are to gender justice or to respecting our feelings. Countless women have struggled with this reality, and different women will make different choices about what to demand of their partners. But the bottom line is that we have a fundamental right to have our feelings heard and respected. Whatever our ultimate decision about how to respond to the men in our lives, we can't let anyone dismiss our feelings or analysis as prudish or uptight.

**Aren't feminists going to end up aiding right-wing zealots if they critique pornography?**

It's true that feminists must be careful not to make alliances with reactionary political movements that want to restrict women's rights and constrain the culture's ability to move toward a healthier sexual culture. But to speak the truth about woman-hating is not to support right-wingers. It's to name a system of oppression and give people the tools to resist it.

**Don't feminists focus on the worst kind of pornography, the most brutal images? Isn't most pornography just people having sex?**

This presentation avoided some of the harsher images that are widely available. What you saw in this show is the "mainstream" of the pornography industry, and it really is that brutal. A tour through any pornography shop or internet sites will demonstrate that, if anything, this presentation has avoided the worst of what's available.

**How can I know these images are representative of what most men watch?**

This show was designed and written by three university professors—from the disciplines of sociology, media studies, and philosophy—who have 60 years of combined experience studying pornography and its effects on the culture. In addition to their experience, they drew on a major new academic study of the content of contemporary pornography conducted by scholars in media studies and psychology, which showed dramatic levels of sexualized aggression in pornography. Again, as difficult as it may be to face, these images are the norm in pornography.

**No one makes anyone watch pornography. So, if you don't like it, just avoid it.**

If only it were that easy. The problem is that women walking down the street have to deal with the men who consume pornography. A female secretary has to deal with a male boss who surfs porn sites on the internet in his office. A female student has to deal with a male professor who compulsively watches pornography at home. The effects of pornography don't stay in the private sphere. So, we have no choice but to raise the issue in the public sphere.

**The First Amendment protects free speech. So, your criticism is irrelevant.**

Two points: (1) All interpretations of the First Amendment allow people to seek justice, in the form of damages for the predictable effects of harmful speech. For example, libel law allows people to seek damages when false and defamatory claims are made about them, and no one claims it violates the First Amendment. Many kinds of speech that cause harm are prohibited or proscribed in some way. (2) Beyond that, this slide show doesn't address legal issues. What can we say about the state of free speech in a culture when the First Amendment is used as a weapon to silence critics of a misogynistic industry? In this presentation, we have made no argument about legal strategies. We are talking about how to understand contemporary pornography. We are using our freedom of speech, not repressing someone else's.

**No one has ever proved a direct link between pornography and sexual violence. So, there's no reason to make a big deal out of this.**

It's true that "scientific proof" establishing a direct connection between pornography use and rape doesn't exist. Human behavior is far too complex to make such simplistic claims. But research has made it clear that the use of pornography is a factor in shaping the culture in which we struggle with epidemic levels of sexual violence, and that it is a factor in some men's sexual aggression. Scholars may differ about the specific nature of pornography's effects, but no one doubts that mass media affect behavior. That's why businesses worldwide spend more than \$400 billion a year on advertising—mass-media images influence people's behavior.

**The slide show avoids discussion of gay or lesbian pornography. Don't those genres offer a different vision of sexuality?**

Indeed, there is sexually explicit material that features gay male and lesbian sex. Our focus has been exclusively on material for a heterosexual male audience, because that is by far the largest portion of the market and the most crucial in a world where women are at risk. Sadly, the vast majority of commercial gay male pornography mimics the domination/subordination dynamic of straight porn. So does much of the lesbian pornography. Those genres should be the subject of analysis as well, but it's not our focus here.

**What kind of pornography would you endorse? Can there be feminist pornography?**

In a mass-mediated culture, it's not surprising that there would be interest in countering misogynist and racist images with healthier depictions of sexuality. But is that really the most important question at the moment? The rush to imagine "good" pornography can be a way to avoid contemplating the nature of the actual pornography we live with. Also, if a central component of the gender/sexuality crisis is a failure of human communication, why would we

assume that better movies are the answer? There no doubt is a place for the creative arts in the culture's struggle for gender justice and a healthy sexuality. But are the most important questions really about how to make a feminist pornography? Perhaps a more constructive first step would be to talk honestly about the sex/gender crisis we face.

**I see the problems. But what can we do about this?**

The first thing we all can do is refuse to capitulate to the pornography industry. We can speak out against the misogyny and racism in the images. We can ask critical questions about its effects on women and men, girls and boys. We can refuse to back down when pornography supporters call us prudes. We can demand changed behavior from men. And beyond that, we can begin to strategize about possible uses of public policy to address the harms of pornography. In the 1980s, a new legal strategy that identified pornography as a civil-rights issue for women was developed, leading to an ordinance that would put the power to hold pornographers accountable in the hands of women—not police and prosecutors. Although the ordinance never became law, some aspects of that approach potentially could be adapted to the current cultural landscape. Any political project requires public education and organizing—helping people deepen their understanding, and then creating vehicles for change. At this point in the struggle, we have a lot of public education to do, in a culture in which pornography has become so normalized and mainstream. Questions about legislative and legal strategies are being discussed, as are direct-action strategies. This is a creative time in the movement for adapting past strategies and creating new ones as more and more people get together in groups to organize.