



A Look Into the Feminist Perspectives of Pornography: Empowering or a Means of Exploitation?

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Introduction



Through this research I aimed to explore the varying perspectives on the pornography industry, focusing on an intersectional feminist approach and hoping to answer the question of if pornography could be considered a medium for empowerment in feminist movements or a simply means of exploitation. The answers are not black and white and many of the perspectives such as anti-porn feminist and sex-positive feminist each hold valid arguments. To analyze an issue as complex as this is to recognize the stances of both sides, as they are both rooted in a reality. Historically, pornography has been perceived as an exploitative industry that does not in any way offer progression for women, however the question remains of are there ways in which it can be self-empowering and challenge patriarchal heteronormative narratives? And, while it exists, shouldn't feminism support the choices of sex workers and those who rely on the industry for their livelihoods? In this research these questions of the porn industry as it relates to feminism, gender, race and class are examined to make sense of the prevalent competing perspectives.

Anti-Porn Feminism



Studies on pornography have often been centered around men, diving into their usage, addictions and overall effects of the industry on their perspectives of women. It is commonly understood that pornography gives people misleading ideas about sex and women, as much of pornography caters and is used by men. Research seems to be lacking in the actual world of pornography and sex work with a focus on the workers themselves. Society must take a look at the conditions and lives of these sex workers to have a broader picture of real effects of the pornography industry.

Why anti-porn in feminism?

Some feminists will take an anti-porn stance because of the way it portrays women, which is a real and valid problem. However I wanted to look more into why they might take this stance as it pertains to the women actually working in the field. Unsurprisingly, the conditions and politics of the pornography industry leave women impoverished, stigmatized, and exploited, which is another reason why some people are inclined to feel negatively about the industry.

Anti-Porn Feminism: The Workplace



It is important to look at the experience of workers in the porn industry. The field is made up of a variety of people with different backgrounds, however, that does not exclude certain trends from appearing. In interviews with women working in the industry, they state manipulation and coercion as serious issues within the industry and barriers like online permanence and lack of perceived alternatives prevent workers from leaving (Dovevan). In another study when 176 adult film stars were asked their likes and dislikes of the industry, the dislikes outweighed the likes in severity and real world consequences.

Likes: Money

Sex

Freedom/Independence

Attention

Fun

Creative Expression

Rebellion

Dislikes: People

STD risk

Exploitation

Work Conditions

Social Stigma

Drugs

Politics

Discomfort

Outside Relationships

(Griffith)

Anti-Porn Feminism: The Workers

To reiterate, there are a variety of workers in the pornography industry, meaning they come from a different backgrounds and have differing motivations for their careers choice. Anti-porn feminist will often make the argument that sex work is never truly done by choice, whether explicit coercion is present or not. While a woman may not be taken and sold into sex work against her will, for other women socioeconomic factors contribute to her going into the industry and making the unconscious choice for her. Griffith's study cited money as both the number one reason why people go into the industry and also the number one thing they enjoy about it. While these women may be making the choice to go into pornography, really there are other factors like gender, class, age, and race and mental health that are "forcing their hand."



“Young age, financial insecurity, earlier exposure to sexualized violence, and poor mental health” (Donevan).

- On typical backgrounds and contributing factors in porn workers

The Workers Continued

Issues of Consent

Consent is a huge issue in the pornography industry, especially when it comes to online content. Because anyone could upload and view pornography, it is extremely hard to monitor what goes up on sites and the circumstances in the videos themselves. Many people like to think that pornography is done between two consenting actors, however this is not always the case. In 2020 Pornhub removed 10 million videos across the platform because they could not confirm that the acts portrayed in them were consensual or that the people in them were above 18, despite claiming that they monitored what was being uploaded. This is a huge issue when acts of sexual assault, rape and coercion are put up free to view and is blatantly exploitative of the people in them.

Porn sites have blocked search words like “rape” to try and prevent these videos from going up or being searched, however producers often get around this with thinly veiled buzz words for these things. Women are typically portrayed as the victims in these videos.

Common searches: Barely Legal

Virgin

Petite

Teen

Forced

(“Does the Porn Industry Really Care about Empowering Women?”)

The Workers Continued

Intersectionality



The issue of pornography and feminism cannot be looked at without taking on an intersectional approach. Just as women of color face unique oppression of a combination of sexism and racism, they also face this when working in the porn industry. The relationship between race and porn has been studied and it is obvious that porn plays on harmful racial stereotypes in its content. Black, Hispanic, and Asian sex workers are routinely put into scenes that highlight their race, both fetishizing and dehumanizing them. Violent and aggressive content is produced among Black and Hispanic sex workers at a rate much higher than white women (Merrickins). There is no question that this behavior is then translated back into the world separate from pornography. At the same time, these stereotypes dehumanize Black and brown bodies to uphold Eurocentric beauty standards and purity culture. (Gardner).

Real Porn Video Titles That Highlight Race: (Merrickins)

“Black Slave Punished by White Master”

“Black Slave Girl Brutalized”

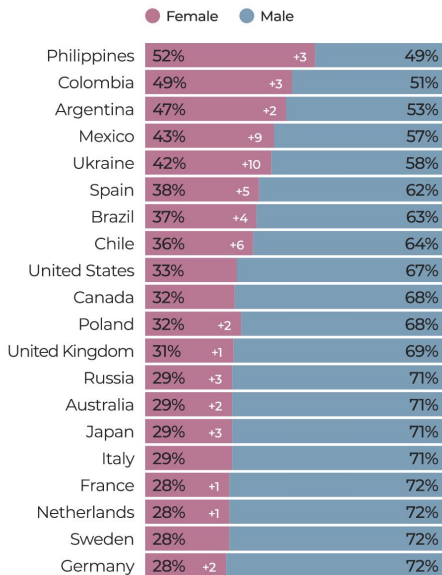
“Skanky N****r gives a Blowjob”

The Other Side: Pornography as a Means to Changing Narratives

2021 YEAR IN REVIEW

Pornhub

Proportion of Female Visitors



35%

Proportion of Female Visitors Worldwide

+5%

Proportional Growth in 2021

New wave feminism has taken on a key viewpoint in recent decades: sexual liberation. Feminist of this viewpoint see sex as something to be utilized in the discussion on women's rights and empowerment. It is not secret that women are sexual beings as well: in Pornhub's 2021 Yearly Review, the site saw a 5% increase in female users totaling to a proportion of 35% of women on the site. Perhaps it can be argued that pornography can be used as something progressive and actively fight harmful patriarchy, beauty standards and heteronormativity.

Changing Narratives

Intersectionality



One of the biggest arguments against anti-porn feminism is that it is a movement largely composed of white heterosexual women aiming their outrage over sexual obscenity and objectification without input from sex workers themselves or minority feminists. Why can't pornography be used as a means to challenge society norms? Additionally, if feminism protects women's freedoms to choose, shouldn't it also protect those who choose to go into porn?

Some argue that sex work performed by those who do not fit into traditional beauty standards of the male gaze or heterosexual patriarchal foundations is an act of real world empowerment and authenticity (Davey).

A key theme in book *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies* by Dr Gemma Commane is how the interviewees feel their work is a **“form of activism in shaping socio-political discourses regarding femininity and women's sexualities”** “

“Many sex workers feel that special calling for their work and they will tell you, honestly, how empowering the adult industry has been for them. They'll explain how through sex work they found the happiness, purpose and meaning that had always eluded them” (Noelle)

Reconciling Feminism with Pornography: Ethical Production/Consumption



Something that many feminists call for in the effort in making progressive pornography is authenticity and ethical production. In fact, in a study where women were asked what they search and prioritize in pornography many of them stated looking for what they perceived as authentic and realistic portrayals of women and sex, as well as ethically made porn involving consenting adults and paid actors (Macleod). This is where the crossover between feminism and porn consumption comes: recognizing that some porn is more ethical than others and that as an existing industry there will always be consumers including women. By seeing this, authentic and ethical porn can be produced and thereby lessen the harmful experiences of women in that workplace.

Conscionable Consumption

Whereby consumers avoid behavior and material that they consider very unethical.

(Macleod)

Conclusions: Separating the Work from the Industry



Throughout this research it seemed to me that there was a glaring difference between the sex work and sex worker themselves, and the actual porn industry as a system of sellers and consumers. Anti-porn feminists are right to condemn the porn **industry** for its exploitative and harmful conditions for women, however intersectional feminism cannot condemn the women working as sex workers. Feminism protects the freedoms of women to make choices and for feminists to criticize these women for their work is a blatant disregard for the socioeconomic factors at play and overall freedom of these women to choose. Sex work can be enjoyable for women and makes them feel empowered. It can contribute to changing previously held narratives. Sex work is the world's oldest profession and is here to stay, so it is important to humanize these workers and advocate for spaces in which they can make their livelihoods safely. Feminists against the porn industry should instead be looking at preventative measures such as access to education, housing, food, and financial stability in impoverished areas so that women who are not already inclined to the porn industry are not forced to make that decision.



Conclusion: The Pornography Industry Will Never Be Ethical

“A woman cannot gain power through sex work any more than she can set herself free by being an accountant. If she's not cut out for the job, or if she's doing it for the wrong reasons, it will never, ever empower her”

(Noelle.)

There is a difference between feeling empowered and actually being empowered. **Sex work** can feel empowering and liberating for women, which is why it should not be condemned. The belief that freedom of choice is inherently empowering is a cornerstone of feminist philosophy. However, sex work as it pertains to the pornography **industry** can never actually empower the worker in terms of gaining additional power in real world terms. There will always be a level of exploitation in the industry because that is what all industries under capitalism capitalize on. To believe that taking part in the pornography industry will lead to a form of liberation is another disregard for the realities at hand.