

# SELLING SEX SHORT

THE PORNOGRAPHIC AND  
SEXOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION  
OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY  
IN THE WEST

Meagan Tyler



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The Pornographic and Sexological  
Construction of Women's Sexuality in the West

By

Meagan Tyler

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AASECT	American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists
AVN	Adult Video News
BDSM	Bondage, Discipline and Sadomasochism
CATW	Coalition Against Trafficking in Women
COYOTE	Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics
ED	Erectile Dysfunction
FSD	Female Sexual Dysfunction
HSDD	Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder
HSRC	Human Sexual Response Cycle
ICDC	International Consensus Development Conference
ISD	Inhibited Sexual Desire
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SAR	Sexual Attitude Reassessment
SST	Sexual Script Theory
WAP	Women Against Pornography
WHISPER	Women Harmed In Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt



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## INTRODUCTION

This book aims to explore and explain the model of sexuality currently being constructed through the industries of pornography and sexology (the “science of sex”) in the West, in particular the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. The book focuses on five trends which have occurred or intensified during the last decade, namely: the pornographication of culture or the mainstreaming of pornography, the rise of extreme and violent sex acts in mass-marketed pornography, the resurgence of sexology, the creation of “female sexual dysfunction” (FSD), and the rise of “porn stars” as sex experts. While there is now an emerging body of literature, both popular and academic, which is beginning to document some of these trends only a handful of sources currently engage in critical feminist analysis. This book takes up the task of attempting to fill this gap by applying a feminist analysis that understands the current trends within pornography and sexology as political issues which affect the status of women. Ultimately, this book is about how pornography and sexology are selling sex short.

In the last decade the industries of pornography and sexology have entered into a period of substantial growth. The US-based pornography industry now produces more than 10,000 titles a year and worldwide the pornography industry grosses in excess of \$60 billion worldwide (Sarikakis & Shaukat, 2008). More than \$10 billion of this is accounted for by profits from the US alone (Williams, 2007). It is estimated that the US pornography industry has doubled in size in less than a decade. This boom in pornography industry profits has been built on several factors, including the success of DVD and internet technology (Maddison, 2004), as well as the rise of extreme sex acts such as bukkake, ass-to-mouth and double and triple anal penetration (Jensen, 2007). During this same period of significant financial growth, pornography, and the sex industry more generally, have gained increasing acceptance and influence in the West, particularly in regard to popular culture. Stripping and pole dancing have become redefined as new forms of exercise, mainstream publications such as *Time* and *The Economist* report on the financial successes of the pornography industry as “just another business” (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002), and Jenna Jameson, arguably the world’s most famous porn star, has become a household name. Pop culture references to pornography in

fashion and advertising can even be said to have developed a degree of “cultural chic”. The pornography industry has often actively sought this type of mainstream attention and validation. Pornography giant *Playboy* for example, has found great financial success in merchandising, allowing an extensive range of goods to be emblazoned with the famous “bunnyhead logo”. It is important to note that while these processes of pornographication, or mainstreaming pornography, have created a “soft” or more acceptable image of pornography, the content of mainstream pornography itself has, almost simultaneously, moved toward increasingly violent and degrading content.

Mirroring the changes in pornography, over the past decade the sexology industry has seen both its profits and public profile increase significantly. After a period of stagnation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, sexology, and its most prominent subsidiary, sex therapy, have benefited considerably from the immense medical and popular interest in the release of Viagra for the treatment of erectile dysfunction. The subsequent search for a similar pharmaceutical “cure” for women’s sexual “dysfunctions” has also attracted significant research and public attention particularly after the now widely published claim that 43 percent of American women suffer from some form of FSD (Laumann et al., 1999). In order to address this apparent epidemic, sexologists have variously endorsed the use of drugs to facilitate vasocongestion (Berman & Berman, 2001; Berman et al., 1999; Miyagawa, 2005), the elevation of testosterone levels through pills, patches and creams (Apperloo et al., 2003; Berman & Berman, 2001; Berman et al., 1999; Guay, 2007; Van Anders et al., 2005) and the use of sex aids such as the Food and Drug Administration approved “clitoral therapy device” which is supposed to simulate the sensations of oral sex (Fishman & Mamo, 2001). The promotion of Viagra and the invention of FSD have undoubtedly helped fuel the growth in sexology industry profits but the relatively uncritical acceptance of these developments in the popular media has also bolstered sexology’s authority over popular conceptions of sexuality. An investigation of the links between pornography and sexology is therefore particularly timely, for as the financial weight and cultural influence of these industries continue to grow, an analysis of what type of sexuality pornography and sexology are promoting becomes increasingly necessary.

In order to provide a thorough analysis of the model of sexuality promoted by sexology and pornography, this book can be seen as loosely separated into four sections. Firstly, the theoretical framework is set out, then there is a section on pornography, followed by a section on sexology, and finally the drawing together of pornography and sexology and the

conclusion. Chapter one sets up the overall framework and explains the links between pornography, prostitution and harm. Chapters two and three deal specifically with pornography and pornographication. Chapters four and five focus on sexology and sex therapy, and chapter six and the conclusion emphasise the links between pornography and sexology. Each part of the book builds toward providing an explanation of what model of sexuality pornography and sexology are currently constructing for women, and seeks to answer one key question. The first part of the book asks: How do pornography and prostitution fit within theories of the social construction of sexuality? The second part asks: What model of sexuality is the pornography industry promoting for women and how is it popularised? The third part asks: What model of sexuality are sexology and sex therapy promoting for women and how is it popularised? And the final part asks: What are the material links between the pornography and sexology industries? It is concluded that pornography and sexology have a profound influence on the social construction of sexuality and that they provide mutually reinforcing models of what that sexuality should be. It is argued that the sexuality promoted by sexology and pornography closely resembles the sex of prostitution and that this is a model of sexuality that sells sex short. It is a model that makes it difficult for women to realise sexual pleasure and a model that relies upon and reinforces sexual inequality between women and men. It is a model that needs to be questioned and overturned if future generations of women want to achieve sexual liberation.

I argue in this book that radical feminism is particularly well positioned to offer an analysis of the ways in which sexology and pornography are affecting the cultural construction of sexuality and the position of women. Sexuality has always been an area central to radical feminist theory and both sexology and pornography have been highlighted by radical feminists as institutions which have been of primary importance in shaping dominant cultural conceptions of sexuality (e.g. Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1994; Jackson, 1984, 1987, 1994; Jeffreys, 1985, 1990, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989, 1993; Russell, 1998; Scully, 1985). However, a radical feminist approach is often controversial, unpopular, or both, so some further explanation is in order.

The analysis of the relationship between pornography, prostitution and sexuality offered by radical feminists has faded from favour within in the academy in recent times. As Stevi Jackson notes, after the so-called “sex wars” of the 1980s, “taking a radical feminist perspective poses its own problems – not least the necessity of correcting misapprehensions currently in circulation about what radical feminism is” (Jackson, 1996, p.

22). It is thus necessary to briefly explain what adopting a radical feminist framework means in the context of this book, and through this explanation, put to rest some of the more common misrepresentations of radical feminist theory.

In *Re-Thinking Radical Feminism*, Kathy Miriam claims that radical feminist analysis remains significant because it offers both “a critique of gender as a category of hierarchy and [a] projection of social formations beyond male dominance” (Miriam, 1998, p. 7). That is to say, it offers critical opposition to the system of male dominance as well as providing, in Miriam’s terms, the “moral imagination” to conceive of a system in which women could be better off (Miriam, 1998). This book is primarily focused on the former, that is, using radical feminist analysis to critique the way in which sexuality is constructed rather than offering up new ways of understanding and constructing sexuality, although the concept of an ethical sexuality as a way forward is discussed in the conclusion.

The naming of the social system of male dominance is an important element of radical feminist theory but the concept of male dominance remains an area in which there are often misconceptions. It is sometimes assumed, for example, that male dominance refers to a system in which *all* individual men dominate *all* individual women, *always*. Related to this is the more commonly expressed idea that in naming men as a dominant social class, radical feminists believe all individual women to be forced into the role of helpless victims. Firstly, as Miriam (2005) has argued, this is a false representation of the radical feminist position. Outlining structures of dominance does not equate to arguing that individuals are wholly powerless. Secondly, the critique is also misguided as the focus on the individual overlooks one of the most valuable insights of radical feminist theory, which is the importance of *social institutions*. While social institutions are not completely separate from individual action, they operate at a level above the individual, as Denise Thompson (2001) explains:

Male domination...is a social system, a matter of meanings and values, practices and institutions. While social structures are maintained through the commitment and acquiescence of individuals, and can be eroded by the refusal of individuals to participate, they have a life of their own, and can continue to exert their influence despite the best efforts of the well intentioned (Thompson, 2001, p. 8).

This is not to suggest, Thompson adds, that the system of male dominance is “monolithic and inexorable” (p. 12). On the contrary, she notes that one of the great strengths of feminism has been exposing and

naming male domination *as domination*. The exposure in itself is a challenge to the existing order, as “social domination operates most efficiently to the extent that it ensures compliance by being disguised as something else, and not domination at all” (Thompson, 2001, p. 8).

Related to the concept of male domination is the radical feminist understanding that women constitute a sex class. This understanding is based in a belief that women share a common oppression (Jaggar, 2005). The concept of women as class is generally traced back to Kate Millett’s groundbreaking text *Sexual Politics*. In *Sexual Politics* (1971) Millett posited that men and women were socialised into “basic patriarchal politics” where men as group were bestowed with superior status and power over women as a group (p. 26), an idea which has since been employed by a number of prominent radical feminists (e.g. Barry, 1979, 1995; Dworkin, 1993; Jaggar, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989; Pateman, 1988; Wittig, 2005). As with the concept of male dominance, the idea that women constitute a class is often misrepresented. It is sometimes claimed, for example, that suggesting women are a class equates to stating that all women experience oppression in exactly the same way, or that there are no divisions among women (Ramazanoglu, 1989). As Caroline Ramazanoglu (1989), clarifies, however, “[r]adical feminists who take this line do not necessarily deny significant class divisions between women, but they argue that it is the gender struggle to which feminist politics must be first addressed” (p. 102). She suggests, therefore, that the labelling of women as a class is a unifying strategy that is useful for political activism.

Naming women as a class may be useful in terms of rhetoric and activism but the purpose can be seen to go beyond political strategy. Monique Wittig (2005) has argued, for example, that naming women as a class is an important way of emphasising that gender is socially constructed. Wittig states that to name women as a class “is to say that the category ‘woman’ as well as the category ‘man’ are political and economic categories not eternal ones” (p. 160). Understanding women as a class therefore connects individual experiences of harm and exploitation to ideology and systems of structural oppression. In this way it is a particularly useful concept for this book as most chapters seek to emphasise the connections between the material reality of women’s lives in prostitution and pornography to the social construction of women’s sexuality more generally.

Employing terms such as “male dominance” and “women’s oppression” can also be seen as an important way of reinforcing the political implications of feminist insights regarding the social construction of sexuality. Thompson (2001), for example, critiques the common use of the term



“social construction” as being too neutral. Thompson suggests that to speak only of the social construction of sexuality says nothing of the power relations which are involved in the constructing or who benefits from the outcome. Catharine MacKinnon also mentions this problem in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*:

[I]t has become customary to affirm that sexuality is socially constructed. Seldom specified is what, socially, it is constructed of... *Constructed* seems to mean influenced by, directed, channelled, like a highway constructs traffic patterns. Not: Why cars? Who's driving? Where's everybody going? What makes mobility matter? Who can own a car? Is there a pattern that makes all these accidents look not very accidental? (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 131 [emphasis original]).

Radical feminist theory, however, does allow for asking these questions. The analysis does not end with simply stating that sexuality is constructed, but rather extends to allow for judgements to be made about different models of sexuality. This is particularly important when trying to evaluate whether or not a system is harmful for women.

Radical feminists offer strong critiques of the social construction of sexuality under systems of male dominance, and a number have further highlighted sexuality as an area which actually continues to create and reinforce women's oppression (MacKinnon, 1989; Jeffreys, 1990). As Diane Richardson (1997) has noted, such critiques have often led to radical feminism being attacked as both essentialist and anti-sex. The tag of essentialism is rather easily disproved, as radical feminist writing shows a conscious and clear commitment to the broad theory of social constructionism, especially in regard to gender and sexuality. Indeed, the idea that sexuality is *political*, therefore *social*, and able to be changed through social action, is a central part of the radical feminist project (Richardson, 1997, 2000; Shulman, 1980).

The anti-sex label is more difficult to shift. This label is generally employed by critics as a way of dismissing radical feminist analysis altogether, as though being against sex is so clearly absurd that it undermines the entire body of theory. As Dorchen Leidholdt (1990) has argued, it also draws on the more common use of anti-sex as an “age-old antiwoman slur” used to silence women who resist dominant cultural expectations of how women should behave sexually. While there were certain individual women, and even groups within the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s that openly advocated an anti-sex position, for example, Women Against Sex (see: Southern Women's Writing Collective, 1990), it is not these activists to which the label is commonly

applied. Rather it is applied to radical feminists who critique heterosexual sexual practices, sadomasochism and pornography. As Richardson argues in *Rethinking Sexuality* (2000), this misrepresentation may well result from the failure of oppositional, so called “pro-sex” theorists, or sexual libertarians, to interrogate their own definitions of what constitutes “sex”. In other words, labelling a critique of dominant, existing constructions of sex and sexuality as a critique of all sex, shows an inability to imagine how sex might be changed to become something not currently prescribed by dominant models.

In contrast, radical feminists have taken up the challenge to conceive of a sexuality outside of male dominance and can therefore offer an extended critique (Miriam, 1998). Radical feminists, most notably radical lesbian feminists, have theorised new models of sexuality that focus on intimacy, embodiment, pleasure and equality. Nett Hart (1996), for example, attempts a “reformulation of desire” which is not “cluttered by heteropatriarchal experiences and expectations” in the edited collection *An Intimacy of Equals: Lesbian Feminist Ethics* (Mohin (ed.), 1996). She suggests an embodied sexuality in which “violation is unimaginable”:

What I am looking for is an embodied sexuality, a relationship that begins in the meeting of heart to bone, skin to tongue, rather than a sexuality that originates in the mind and is translated to physicality (Hart, 1996, p. 74).

Such a position is clearly not anti-sex, but it does challenge dominant constructions of what sex should be.

Despite the benefits of applying radical feminist analysis to the areas of sexology, pornography and the social construction of sexuality, radical feminism is not the dominant analytical framework through which these subjects are understood. Instead, sexual libertarian and postmodern approaches to pornography have become prominent within academia over the past two decades (Attwood, 2002; Eaton, 2007) and this has largely resulted in the de-politicisation of academic analyses of pornography. In addition, as pornography and pornographic imagery are gaining increasing acceptance in popular culture, the traditional feminist analysis of pornography as objectifying or dehumanising women is becoming increasingly seen as out-dated (Williamson, 2003). Moreover, there are some theorists and pornographers alike (e.g. Johnson (ed.), 2002; Mason, 2005; McElroy, 1995; Taormino, 2005) who have begun to appropriate the language of feminism to support the pornography industry claiming, for example, that watching or performing in pornography offers women sexual liberation. Similar feminist rhetoric is employed by sex therapists

and media commentators who couch the search for a “women’s Viagra” in terms of women’s sexual rights (e.g. Berman & Berman, 2001).

As this book aims to show, however, the use of feminist language in support of pornography and sexology confuses rather than clarifies what model of sexuality these industries are actually constructing for women. To borrow from Thompson (2001), this is domination operating more effectively because it is disguised as something other than domination. Given these changes in popular and academic discourse surrounding pornography and sexology, the importance of applying a radical feminist analysis, which exposes sites of male domination, becomes even greater. As psychiatrist and FSD critic Leonore Tiefer has noted, “a feminist analysis seems especially called for to expose how the rhetoric of equal sexual rights conceals the subtler operations of power” (Tiefer, 2001, p. 91). Indeed, offering an analysis of how the pornographic and sexological models of sexuality prescribe certain unequal power relations between men and women is a central theme explored in this book.

Chapter one develops a further exploration of this feminist analysis as it relates to pornography and prostitution. This chapter provides the evidence and analysis for two of the main arguments that underpin the book, namely that pornography is a form of prostitution and that pornography and prostitution cause harm to women. The harms of prostitution and pornography are analysed at some length through an evaluation of a number of sociological studies and relevant feminist theory, both radical and non-radical. The argument is made that what defines prostitution as harmful is not an element of monetary exchange but rather the model of sexuality which is involved. It is then argued that if pornography is a form of prostitution, pornography can also be seen as harmful. Moreover, it is argued that pornography can be understood as a particularly harmful and extreme form of prostitution. This idea is taken up further in chapter two.

Chapter two offers an analysis of the model of sex promoted in pornography and examines the rise of violent and extreme sex acts in mainstream, mass-marketed pornography. For more than a decade, academic defences of pornography as either harmless or liberating have proliferated but, in contrast, there is acknowledgement from within the pornography industry that during the last ten years mainstream pornography has become more violent, degrading and extreme, increasingly involving physical harm to performers (Amis, 2001; Anderson, 2003; Ramone & Kernes, 2003). It is posited in this chapter that the differing explanations of pornography from inside and outside the industry can be at least partially explained by academic defences of pornography focusing almost

exclusively on consumption while overlooking the conditions under which pornography is produced. An argument is made for the importance of considering the content of pornography through the production process and focusing in particular on the harm that is inflicted on women through the production of mainstream pornography. The content and production of pornography is explored in the remainder of the chapter through an analysis of the US pornography industry publication *Adult Video News* (AVN). This analysis shows that violent and extreme sex acts are not only prevalent in mainstream pornography but that producers expect these acts to appeal to consumers. Such evidence strongly undermines the prevailing approaches to pornography within the academy which represent violence and degradation as peripheral to, or unrepresentative of, current mainstream pornography (e.g. McKee, Albury & Lumby, 2008). It is concluded that evidence from within the industry should inform feminist analyses of pornography and pornographication.

The issue of pornographication, or the mainstreaming of pornography, is taken up in chapter three which considers the way in which the model of sex found in pornography is being popularised. Following on from chapter two, it is argued that a feminist analysis of the mainstreaming of pornography needs to be based on an understanding of the current content and production of mainstream pornography. Such a position is largely absent in current popular and academic understandings of pornographication which have tended to either reify the trend as potentially liberatory or decry it as the vulgar over-commodification of the “private” realm of sexuality (c.f. Boyle, 2010). Neither of these positions is informed by the trends which are actually taking place within the pornography industry. While the amount of literature on the mainstreaming of pornography is rapidly increasing, it is as though no-one has thought to ask what it is exactly that is being mainstreamed. It is therefore put forward in chapter three, that the pornographication of culture needs to be understood as the mainstreaming of a harmful model of prostitution sex and perhaps even as the mainstreaming of eroticised violence against women.

Having established that pornography promotes a model of prostitution sex which is particularly harmful for women, chapters four and five deal with the model of sex promoted in sexology, the scientific study of sexuality, and how it is popularised through sex therapy and self-help books. Chapter four focuses on the bio-medical model of sexuality and related feminist critiques, before moving on to a discussion of recent trends in sexology and sex therapy. Through a feminist analysis of recent sexological literature, the creation of FSD is highlighted as a significant change that has put increased pressure on women to meet the sexual

demands of their partners. The medicalised conception of sexual desire which informs the FSD model is singled out as being problematic for women, and the sexological construction of desire is compared to the pornographic rape myth. It is argued that the current sexological model of desire makes it difficult if not impossible for women to be able to rationally refuse heterosexual intercourse within a relationship and therefore this model, in effect, requires women to be constantly sexually available, an element of the sex of prostitution. It is concluded that there are significant similarities between the model of sex found in systems of prostitution and the model of sex promoted for women through the supposedly reputable and medically based science of sexology.

Chapter five continues the critique of the sexological model of sexuality through an analysis of sex self-help books written by renowned sexologists. Sex self-help books are of particular interest as they are one of the most prominent mediums through which the findings from scientific sexology are transmitted through to the public and popular culture (Irvine, 1990; Potts, 2002). They are therefore one way in which the sexological model become popularised, and can be seen to have an influential role in constructing normative notions of heterosexuality (Potts, 2002). The self-help literature considered in this chapter details the concrete action therapists and sexologists expect men and women to take in order to achieve the ideal model of sexuality. Five therapist recommended texts are analysed in depth. A feminist analysis of these texts shows quite clearly what is expected of women within the medical model of sexuality. It is argued that the sex self-help books promote a harmful model of sex which encourages women to actively, sexually service men at the cost of their own pleasure and comfort. It is further argued that the model of sex present in these texts contains significant similarities to the model of prostitution sex outlined in chapter one.

Finally, the two areas of sexology and pornography are brought together explicitly in chapter six with an analysis of the material links between the pornography and sexology industries. As there is only very limited literature which deals with pornography and sexology in conjunction, this chapter focuses on documenting the various ways in which pornography and sexology intersect. These intersections include the use of pornography in sexology research, the use of pornography as a form of sex therapy, the endorsement of "sex education videos" by sexologists and the rise of porn stars as the new sex "experts". A variety of sources are drawn on, from sex advice books written by pornography performers to sexological literature from respected medical journals. It is concluded that the sexological and pornographic models of sexuality can be seen as

mutually reinforcing. It is proposed that one way of understanding these intersections is that the promotion of pornography within sexology has afforded the pornography industry a degree of legitimacy, which may have in turn fuelled the now popular concept that pornography stars are the ultimate authorities on sex. The collusion between these industries makes it increasingly difficult for women to escape this model of sex, a harmful model that mirrors prostitution sex and is based on the eroticising of women's inequality. The possibility of imagining and moving beyond this model of sexuality is discussed in the conclusion.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### MAKING CONNECTIONS: PORNOGRAPHY, PROSTITUTION AND HARM

This chapter provides the theoretical grounding for two premises on which much of this book is based. First, is the concept that pornography and prostitution are inseparable, that pornography is in fact, a form of prostitution. A variety of data is used to support this proposition, which is based in both feminist theory and the lived experiences of women in prostitution and pornography. The second proposition is that prostitution (and therefore pornography) is harmful. There is now growing sociological research into the experiences of women in prostitution that shows that a significant majority are severely harmed by their involvement in prostitution, from violence at the hands of pimps and johns to the painful psychological experiences of dissociation and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This chapter also suggests that that prostitution (and therefore pornography) may be seen as *inherently* harmful. This controversial suggestion is also based in both feminist theory and sociological evidence. Central to this last proposition is the concept of “the sex of prostitution”, the idea that there is something fundamental about prostitution that makes it harmful not only to the women directly abused in it, but also women as a class. Finally, the chapter leads into a brief discussion of the increasing normalisation and cultural validation of the sex of prostitution, or in Kathleen Barry’s terms “the prostitution of sexuality” (Barry, 1995).

#### **Connecting Pornography and Prostitution**

Pornography and prostitution are often, both popularly and legally, conceived as completely separate entities. In many nations of the industrialised West, for example, prostitution is either illegal or officially discouraged by authorities while pornography frequently occupies a more privileged position, sometimes recognised as representation or even art (Spector, 2006a). The US offers a prime example. Prostitution remains



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