



Are variations in gender equality evident in pornography? A cross-cultural study

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ABSTRACT

In 1960, feminist groups and scholars published critiques of common “male-centric” views of sexuality. They analyzed pornography, traditions as to who initiates sexual encounters, the (non)existence of foreplay, and common (male dominant) sexual positions. Some even said such activities should be abolished (see [Dworkin, 1985](#); [Firestone, 1970](#); [Solanas, 1971](#)). Today, the appropriate role of sexuality, specifically the role of pornography in women's lives, probably sparks the biggest debate among feminists. The majority of research on pornography focuses on its misogynistic biases and maladaptive effects, while the minority of literature contends that pornography can be egalitarian and thus be empowering for women. There is little research to test these competing hypotheses as to the value of pornography for women.

This paper was designed to investigate whether or not in societies where men and women are relatively equal in status versus unequal, different kinds of pornography flourishes. Three countries that differed markedly in the status of women (based on their United Nation's Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) ranking published in the 2007/2008 Human Development Report) were selected for comparison: Norway (1), the United States (15), and Japan (54). We then compared the nature of their most popular pornography.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis that – consistent with their GEM ranking – popular Norwegian pornography would depict women in more empowered positions than pornography from the United States and Japan. Results supported this hypothesis. This finding could be attributed to the wider variety in Norwegian pornography, e.g. greater variation in the women's age, weight, and body positioning. There were no significant differences in the extent models in the three countries appeared in demeaning positions.

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In 1988, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon promoted civil rights anti-pornography legislation ([Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988](#)) under the assumption that pornography diminishes gender equality by promoting an image of women as inferior to men. Several empirical studies have examined the claim that pornography disempowers women, fostering sexual aggression ([Baron & Strauss, 1989](#); [Linz, 1989](#)) and potentially generating and reinforcing sexual discrimination ([Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988](#)). Conversely, the minority body of feminist literature contends that pornography can have positive effects and potentially be empowering for women ([Strossen, 1995](#)). However, very little empirical analysis of the relationship

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between gender equality and the characteristics of pornography, or the impact of powerful/subservient women in pornography and gender equality exists (Baron, 1990). In addition, the sparse research that does exist was generally conducted in the United States or the West. This is a general problem in American psychology, of course (Arnett, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate whether cross-cultural differences in gender equality are reflected in a culture's pornographic images. In subsequent research, we would examine whether such cultural differences in depictions also have an impact on women's actual empowerment and disempowerment.

1. Cross-cultural variations in gender equity

According to social structural theory, the division of labor by gender and the gender disparity in power create psychological gender differences (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Applying this theory to sexuality, men are historically more self-sufficient and dominant, and thus are able to use women for casual relationships without commitment (Eagly & Wood, 1999), while women have less power and earning potential than men and must seek long-term, committed relationships with powerful men to obtain protection and resources (Eagly, Wood, & Johanssen-Schmidt, 2004). An unequal distribution of power by gender promotes the idea that women are less valuable than men. One of the consequences of this disparity is the rendering of women into objects whose sole purpose is to satisfy male sexual desires (Hekma, 2008). Thus, social structural theory would predict that gender differences in power create gender differences in sexual attitudes, feelings, and experiences (Petersen and Hyde, 2010).

While men tend to have more power than women in most parts of the world, the magnitude of this difference in power varies across cultures. It seems reasonable to predict that more egalitarian societies (as compared to countries with larger power differentials) should have smaller gender differences in men's and women's sexuality (Petersen and Hyde, 2010).

To assess the extent of gender equality in a given society, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed a gender empowerment measure (GEM). The GEM ranks a total of 93 countries on a composite index measuring gender inequality in three dimensions of empowerment: (1) economic participation and decision-making; (2) political participation; and (3) decision-making and power over economic resources (UNDP, 2007). We would predict that countries with higher scores on the GEM, reflecting greater equality, would tend to display smaller gender differences in sexual attitudes and behavior than would less egalitarian societies (Petersen and Hyde, 2010). Consistent with this prediction by social structural theory, Eagly and Wood (1999) found a negative correlation between the magnitude of gender equality on the 1995 GEM and the magnitude of gender differences in mate preferences. The objective of the present study is to continue this line of inquiry into the relationship between gender empowerment and sexuality by attempting to determine whether or not variations in gender equality have an impact on the type of pornography that is most popular in a given country. Specifically, we would predict that the higher a culture rates on the GEM, the more images of women in pornography would reflect a powerful status.

2. Pornography and the disempowerment of women

According to anti-pornography feminists, pornography both creates and perpetuates gender inequality through promoting a sexist ideology and discriminatory practices against women (Baron, 1990; Dworkin, 1985; MacKinnon, 1984, 1989). First, pornography promotes a sexist ideology by erroneously portraying women as inferior to men and as objects of male sexual gratification (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1982). Consequently, men learn to devalue and exploit women, having been indoctrinated by such anti-female propaganda (Brownmiller, 1975). The second critique by anti-pornography feminists is that pornography promotes discriminatory practices against women, violating their civil rights (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). Dworkin and MacKinnon state that:

The bigotry and contempt pornography promotes, with the acts of aggression it fosters, diminish opportunities for equality of rights in employment, education, property, public accommodations and public services (1988, p. 33).

This critique assumes that pornography is not just fantasy or simulation, but documented discriminatory acts against women with malign consequences.

3. Pornography and the empowerment of women

In opposition to the anti-pornography legislation proposed by MacKinnon and Dworkin, pro-sex and anti-censorship feminists created the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) to defeat the legislation (Duggan, Hunter, & Vance, 1985; Ellis, Jake, Hunter, O'Dair, & Tallmer, 1988). FACT argued against the legislation based on the following objections (Amicus Curiae Brief, 1984):

1. The language of the legislation is broad in scope and could easily be used to restrict sexually explicit materials that women find arousing and empowering;

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