

Feminist Sex Wars

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The phrase “feminist sex wars” refers to debates about both sexual orientation – specifically the role of lesbians and lesbianism in the feminist movement – and sexual practices, especially whether prostitution, pornography, and sado-masochism (S/M), are examples of violence against women or instead can be part of a “sex-positive” feminist practice. Although the arguments about lesbianism were fierce during the second wave of the feminist movement (roughly 1960s through early 1990s), these have largely been resolved. Conflicts over sexual practices, however, are still being fought.

All sides in the sex wars agree that sexuality is socially constructed rather than essential or biologically driven and that sexuality is important in women’s self-development. Disagreement arises over how women can best undo patriarchal definitions of women’s “proper” sexual expression and how women can gain greater control over their sexuality. In particular, feminists debate whether prostitution and pornography constitute violence against women, a type of labor like many others, with harms that feminists should try to minimize, or a potentially liberating form of behavior that can allow women to free themselves from patriarchal expectations that define and constrain women’s sexual identities and practices. In short, feminists continue to debate whether to focus on the “pleasures” or “dangers” of sex and sex work (Vance 1984).

Tensions over the role of lesbians and lesbianism in the feminist movement were

most palpable during the second wave; in 1969, Betty Friedan, then president of the US National Organization of Women, famously referred to lesbians as a “lavender menace” that threatened the focus on women’s shared issues (Jackson and Scott 1996, 13). (Not all heterosexual women shared Friedan’s view; some allied themselves with “gay liberation” groups in a show of solidarity.) Partly in response to views like Friedan’s, the Radicalesbians group wrote the political manifesto *The Woman Identified Woman* (1970), arguing that heterosexual women were collaborating with the enemy by using women’s energy to support men’s needs and power. While this split was most pronounced in the United States, it also existed in women’s liberation movements across Europe (Jackson and Scott 1996; Rowland and Klein 1996). Calls for women-only spaces and lesbian separatism were one result, as were calls for heterosexual women to re-examine their heterosexual privilege, which functions as a pillar of patriarchy (Rich 1978; Clarke 1981; Pharr 1988). Today, lesbians are part of the mainstream feminist movement, and heterosexism is regularly included in analyses of the nexus of power supporting patriarchy.

In the feminist sex wars over sexual practices, there are two primary groups. The first is “abolitionist” or “anti-pornography” radical feminists – erroneously labeled “anti-sex feminists” by some critics – who argue that prostitution and pornography are forms of violence against women (MacKinnon 1987; Jeffreys 1990). Robin Morgan summed up this view with her claim that “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (Morgan 1978, 169). Activist organizations adopting this view include Women Against Pornography, WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of

Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), and, more recently, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. In their account, women's sexuality is socially constructed by and through male domination. Under patriarchy, prostitution and pornography are the ultimate forms of men's perceived right to women's bodies. Abolitionist feminists have tried to get laws passed outlawing pornography, with limited and short-lived success. They have also, more successfully, been influential in state policies to end demand for prostitution by criminalizing "johns." This "Nordic model" of prostitution policy has been adopted by Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and (in a non-binding resolution) the European Parliament.

The other primary group in this debate is generally labeled "pro-sex" or "sex positive." These feminists argue that when women embrace their sexuality, they are undoing the binary of male dominance/female submission. In the view of sex-positive feminists, the anti-pornography argument that sexuality is fundamental to women's oppression amounts to a claim that all sexuality victimizes women. In contrast, sex-positive feminists believe that even when sexuality is infused with dominance and power, its meanings can be contested and it can be an essential site of women's agency. Sex-positive feminists argue that women have a range of desires, and that making and distributing pornography, or engaging in sex work or BDSM, can be ways for women to claim sexual agency. Consequently, abolitionist feminists accuse them of conspiring with patriarchy, echoing the charges lesbian separatists leveled against heterosexual women years ago.

The sex wars over pornography, prostitution, and sexual practices have also spurred theoretical debates between feminism and queer theory (Weed and Schor 1997) and between second- and third-wave feminisms.

"Third wave" refers to a range of positions within feminism, but it is often used to signify more libertarian or individualistic versions of feminist theory and activism that embrace women's individual sexual agency and are skeptical of "victim feminism." Some sex-positive and third-wave feminists align their argument that women have a right to enjoy sexual expression and action with central claims of queer theory, e.g., that sexuality is performative rather than an expression of identity, and that sexuality and sexual practices can be used to challenge dominant notions of gender (Franke 2001). In contrast, abolitionist feminists want to reconstruct sexuality within an egalitarian framework and believe that erotic relations of power cannot be separated from forms of dominance and subordination in spheres such as politics and the economy.

Future sex wars are likely to be fought primarily over prostitution and trafficking. Lesbians and lesbianism are now embraced by mainstream feminism, and arguments about the meaning and value of S/M practices have been folded into the sex work/prostitution debates. Although anti-pornography feminists continue to write and speak about the harms of making and viewing pornography (Boyle 2010), in the United States pornography is well protected by free speech jurisprudence. And with the advent of the Internet and the ability to distribute all kinds of pornography with little public scrutiny, sex-positive feminist pornographers, alongside other pornographers, continue to reach broad, international audiences with minimal regulation.

Conversely, in the United States, the United Nations, and most of Europe, "anti-sex work" feminists have greater political visibility and viability around the issue of prostitution than sex-positive feminists do. Anti-prostitution feminists have successfully combined arguments against prostitution with international

arguments and policies against human trafficking, whereas “sex-positive” feminists argue that trafficking and prostitution are separate problems, not all women who cross borders to engage in sex work are trafficked, and women who engage in prostitution for a variety of reasons should not be penalized by anti-trafficking laws.

SEE ALSO: Feminism, Radical; Human Trafficking, Feminist Perspectives on; Pornography, Feminist Legal and Political Debates on; Prostitution/Sex Work; Queer Theory; Sex-Radical Feminists

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