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DOES PORNOGRAPHY CAUSE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

While waiting in a hotel room recently for my friends to arrive, I turned on the television. I watched in horror for five long minutes while a sadistic, retarded man beat, struck and terrorized a frightened, helpless woman. The prolonged violence was physical and mental, irrational and cunning.

I couldn't help but wonder how such a vivid dramatization might affect a man who is already prone to violence against women. After a few beers, he could easily want to act out the images he watched on the screen, perhaps even on his wife or girl friend.

In the United States, it is liberal chic to deny there is any proof that television or movie violence induces violent behavior. But the most successful businesses in the country are spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year on their belief that 30 seconds of images in a TV commercial will induce viewers to imitate the behavior of the actors and purchase their products. So why wouldn't five minutes of violent, lustful behavior also induce imitation?

In Canada, the Alberta Federation of Women United for Families has issued a 1984 report asserting that pornography is a significant cause of the increased violence toward women and children. The Federation urged the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution to work to strengthen inadequate laws and to increase penalties for violations.

The report quotes a "content analysis" which Neil Malamuth of the Psychology Department of the University of Manitoba made of two popular "soft-core" magazines available in Canada. This analysis showed that the sexual violence in these periodicals increased during the 1970s, and that the one-fifth increase in the number of sexual offenses in Canada between 1976 and 1980 appears to track the increase of sexual violence in "soft" and "hard" porn during the same period.

Malamuth also concluded from an experiment on a group of Winnipeg University students, "first, that mass media violent sexuality has undesirable effects on both attitudes and behavior, and, second, that repeatedly exposing adult males to violent

pornography, resulted in self-generated rape fantasies."

A Vancouver doctor, Susan Penfold, reported last year that there was a large amount of pornography in the homes of most of the father-daughter incest cases she has treated. "Commonly," she told the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Psychiatrist Association, "the father shows the material to his adolescent or pre-adolescent daughter, or leaves it around somewhere in the hope she will see it."

Dr. Penfold explained that the father's intent seems to be to try to vindicate himself by sexually stimulating her, or by inducing her to simulate the females in the pictures, or by getting her to allow him to photograph her in poses like those in the pictures.

"Take Back the Night -- Women on Pornography" edited by Laura Lederer quoted contributor Irene Diamond of Purdue University whose study of police reports indicates that wife batterers are frequently devotees of pornography. She also quotes Dr. James Bannon of the Detroit Police Department as telling her that "often we find that the man is trying to enact a scene in some pornographic pictures."

The May 1982 Report on Violence in the Family by the Canadian Standing Committee on Health Welfare and Social Affairs noted similarities between wife beating and certain forms of pornography. Many witnesses presented oral and written evidence that pornography contributes to the frequency of battered women.

The idea that a woman is just a possession to be used any way a man desires was mentioned repeatedly as part of the problem of battered women. This attitude is promoted in pornographic material, even in the non-violent, "soft" kind.

The report shows that, even in its "mild" forms, pornography is harmful because "it fosters the mentality which considers the human being, not as a person, but as an object which exists to gratify the selfish interests of someone else. Even when there is, or appears to be, consent on the part of the participants, it is still harmful because it encourages mutual exploitation." Pornography is not a victimless crime.

Victims of domestic violence clearly need emergency help. But, the Alberta Federation's report concluded, "more effective laws on pornography are at least as important because we are working to prevent problems, rather than just trying to pick up the pieces afterwards."