

The Impact of Pornography on Women:
Social Science Findings and Clinical Observations

by

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On a recent out-of-state business trip, I encountered a young teenage woman who was wearing a pink tank top that read, “*Future Porn Star*” across the chest. This three-worded aspiration naturally caught my attention due to my clinical work with individuals, couples and families who are grappling with the impact of pornography and sexually compulsive behavior. A myriad of questions crossed my mind after passing the teenage woman. Questions such as, “What motivates a young woman to advertise such a statement?”, “What does it *mean*?”, “Who is she hoping it will offend, attract or...arouse?”, “Who is profiting from this kind of merchandise?”, “If it is a joke, how and when did working in the sex industry become funny as opposed to desperate or oppressive?”, and of course, the infamous “What’s *next*?”. Reflecting on this brief encounter reinforced once again that pornography has long since left the seedy back alley world of the pre-Hugh Hefner era to take a socially and economically legitimized place in mainstream popular culture and the global economy (Morais, 1999). The pink tank top symbolically underscored the fact that the impact of pornography in today’s social milieu, and on women in particular, is complex, multifaceted and unprecedented.

Prior to the advent of the Internet, the pornography debate was entrenched in linear, cause-and-effect assumptions; a focus on the individual as the consumer or victim; legal, feminist, or moral perspectives; and dispute over the often delicate continuum between censorship and freedom of speech (Thompson et al., 1990). In today’s Internet-era, however, the debate and its core assumptions desperately need revising, if not a

major overhaul, in order to address the fact that people of all ages, genders, and socio-economic groups are being exposed to and impacted by pornography. In order to explore how pornography is impacting women specifically also requires a new paradigm.

Women can no longer be categorically described as the objectified, the victimized or the consumed seeing as today they are also the *objectifiers*, the producers and the consumers of pornography. With that said, this paper will attempt to summarize several of the major impacts pornography is having on women through the use of social science findings, cultural trends and clinical observations.

A Sexualized Social Context

Although a female born into today's American society will benefit from conveniences, opportunities, and advances that women before her never knew, she will also be introduced into a society that is arguably more sexually coarse, explicit, confusing and risky than that of past eras. While she will have greater access to information, laws and resources with which to foster sexual health and expression, it would be naive not to juxtapose and acknowledge these advantages against other realities she will face. For example, modern trends in pornography consumption and production, sexualized media, sex crime, sexually transmitted diseases, online sexual predators, Internet dating services, and sexualized cyber bullying combine to make her world more sexually distorting, daunting and aggressive than ever before, and at earlier ages in her development than ever before. Pornography, it could be argued, is altering the cultural zeitgeist in ways we may not come to appreciate or identify until society has paid significant social costs.

Although pornography, in particular, is nothing new, the proximity of the sex industry to the public and private squares is a new phenomenon. In the past, the adult

bookstore and restricted movie theatre house were tangible buffers between sexually explicit material and minors, as well as adults who did not want to be exposed to 'dirty pictures'. Today, if one has cable or an Internet connection one automatically has access to a smorgasbord of sexual content, including obscene content *not* protected by the First Amendment. Moreover, the sex industry has unprecedented access to those who are technologically connected and it capitalizes on this contact with stunning effectiveness, not to mention blatant disregard for those who may be harmed (not just offended) in the process.

The rapid growth of Internet usage has been identified as the primary reason for the exponential increase in pornography use and production, as well as compulsive sexual behaviors related to pornography use (Schneider, 2000a; Schneider, 2000b; Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002). Regarding the impact of the Internet on sexuality generally, Cooper, Boies, Maheu and Greenfield (1999) assert,

Since its inception, the Internet has been associated with sexuality in a kind of synergistic dance, each fueling the transformation of the other. The influence of the Internet on sexuality is likely to be so significant that it will ultimately be recognized as the cause of the next "sexual revolution" (p 519).

This synergistic dance, however, has caused others to argue that pornography and on-line sexual pursuits are "... a hidden public health hazard exploding, in part because very few are recognizing it as such or taking it seriously" (Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000, p. 25). My own clinical observations have caused me to align with this line of thinking. Those who claim pornography is harmless entertainment, benign sexual

expression or a marital aid, have clearly never sat in a therapist's office with individuals, couples or families who are reeling from the devastating effects of this material.

Many agree the influential interplay between the Internet and sexuality, has been largely fueled to a large extent by what Cooper (1998) coined as the Internet's "Triple-A Engine" effect of *accessibility*, *affordability* and perceived *anonymity* (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; McCarthy, 2002; Schneider, 2000a; Schneider, 2000b).

According to current Internet traffic statistics, there are approximately 246,402,574 million Internet users in North America who represent 17.5 percent of the Internet users worldwide (Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, 2008). Since 2000, there has been a 127.9 percent increase in Internet usage, with Internet accessibility now penetrating 73.1 percent of the North American population (Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, 2008). These figures are further put into context when one considers that according to Cooper's (2004) research, 20 to 33 percent of those using the Internet do so for sexual purposes, with more recent online measurement services indicating that approximately 42.7 percent of Internet users now view pornography online (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008).

Furthermore, when one considers the following statistics and points as they relate to the social context that American women are currently being influenced by *and influencing*, a picture begins to come into view that has troubling implications for the social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual lives of women and men:

- In 2006, worldwide pornography revenue was estimated to be \$97.06 billion dollars, with \$13.3 billion of that being generated in the United States (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008).

- Every second, there are approximately 28,258 Internet users viewing pornography (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008).
- Approximately one in four Internet search engine requests is related to pornography (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008).
- Every day there are approximately 116,000 online searches for child pornography (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008).
- Approximately 30 percent of Internet pornography consumers are female (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008; Nielsen/NetRatings, April 2005).
- In 2005, 13,585 hardcore pornographic video/DVD titles were released in the United States. This was up from 1,300 titles in 1988 (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008).
- At the November 2002 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, 62 percent of the 350 attendees said the Internet had been a significant factor in divorces they had handled during that year. It was further revealed that 68 percent of the divorce cases involved one party meeting a new love interest over the Internet; 56 percent of the divorce cases involved one party having an obsessive interest in pornographic websites; and 33 percent of the divorce cases cited excessive time communicating in chat rooms (a commonly sexualized forum) (Dedmon, 2002).
- The number of sex scenes in US television nearly doubled between 1998 and 2005 (Kunkel et al., 2005).

- Between October 2004 and April 2005, 70 percent of the twenty television shows most commonly watched by American teens included sexual content, and 45 percent contained sexual behavior (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007).
- According to Dr. Janice Crouse, a researcher for Concerned Women for America, it is estimated that 600,000-800,000 women, men and children are trafficked internationally each year with another 2 to 4 million trafficked within countries. Women make up 80 percent of humans trafficked and 70 percent of these women are used for sexual purposes (e.g., prostitution). The U.S. government estimates that 14,500 – 17,500 people are trafficked into the U.S. each year. As Dr. Crouse states, “The Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children both recognize that pornography is an element that adds to the serious problem of sex trafficking. Many traffickers are found with filming equipment and cameras to create and sell pornography” (McGinnis, 2007).
- Every 2 minutes, someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted (including rape, attempted rape and other sexually violent felonies), and every 8 minutes, someone in the U.S. is raped (RAINN, 2008).
- In the U.S., one in four adolescent females (ages 14 to 19) is infected with at least one sexually transmitted disease, and 15 percent have more than one sexually transmitted disease (Altman, 2008).

There are many ways to interpret the above listed points and statistics, as well as a plethora of other points that could have been listed here. The goal in highlighting a select few was to set a tone for: (a) understanding how the sex industry and pornography are gaining greater acceptance and presence in our culture, and (b) to gain insight into the

sexual and cultural climate women are currently facing. Because many of these trends are relatively new, it will take time to clarify and isolate what is impacting what (and whom), and how these factors influence female development and lived experiences. In the meantime, my clinical work with women is teaching me that an increasing number of women are seeking out mental health practitioners for issues related to these trends and the manner in which these phenomenon affect their relationships; their home, work and school environments; sexuality; self-esteem; and their identity as women.

Female Adolescents & Pornography

Despite the illegalities of exposing or marketing sexually explicit material to minors, the pornography industry, irregardless of the lip service they give to the contrary, does not discriminate against young consumers. In a study funded by the U.S. Congress through the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2003a) concluded sexually explicit material on the Internet is “very intrusive” and can be inadvertently stumbled upon while searching for other material or opening email. Moreover, in their most recent study, Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2007) found 34 percent of adolescents reported being exposed to *unwanted* sexual content online, a figure that sadly had risen 9 percent over the last five years (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008). As well, the Youth Internet Safety Survey (2000) found that in a nationally representative sample of 1,501 youth, ages 10 to 17 (796 boys and 705 girls), 19 percent reported unwanted sexual solicitation, and 6 percent had been harassed online (Mitchell et al., 2003a). Furthermore, a 2002 Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Report found that 70 percent of youth ages 15 to 17 reported accidentally coming across pornography online, and 23 percent of those youth said this happens “very” or

“somewhat” often. Another startling indicator of this indiscriminate accessibility, is that Nielsen//NetRatings, a reputable and well-recognized source for online audience measurement, includes children beginning at *two years of age* in their demographic statistics for online “adult” traffic (Nielsen//NetRatings, April 2005). When we put these statistics and figures in the context of child development, it is troubling to consider the long term impact of an increasing numbers of youth being exposed to sexual content when they lack the risk attenuation and maturity to process and navigate these experiences in safe and healthy ways (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008).

Filters and active parenting are frequently touted as solutions, but the pornography industry and even our own justice system fall unacceptably short in supporting parents in the difficult task of safeguarding the *choice* to not to have sexually explicit content in their home, never mind honoring existing laws by protecting children from obscenity. For example, approximately 75 percent of pornographic websites display visual teasers on their homepages *before* asking if viewers are of legal age; only 3 percent of pornographic websites require proof of age before granting access to sexually explicit material; and two-thirds of pornographic websites do not include any adult content warnings (Thornburg, & Lin, 2002). Effective age verification systems are available, so it begs the question as to why the industry is not employing them, and conversely why they are not required to do so by society. It is strange how the virtual world has seemingly escaped the societal standards accepted in various public squares even though the Internet has been alive and well since the early 1990s. Even more troubling is the fact that there are currently no filtering systems in place for cell phones

with Internet access or iPods that can transmit “pornography” despite the growing popularity of those media amongst adolescents (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008, p. 433).

A number of studies and surveys have shown that one of the initial impacts pornography has on a developing, adolescent mind is that it evokes upset and distress when one is not psychologically able to process the images (Mitchell et al., 2003a; Mitchell et al., 2003b; Von Feilitzen & Carlsson, 2000; Media Awareness, 2000; Wigley & Clarke, 2000). Youth ages 11 to 17 in an Australian survey (Flood & Hamilton, 2003), used the words “sick,” “yuck,” “disgusted,” “repulsed,” and “upset” to describe how they felt about exposure to online sexual material. If the upset or distress was a fleeting occurrence, it may not be as concerning; however, we know that early exposures to pornography leave a lasting and mostly negative impression (Cantor et al., 2003), and that females report more negative memories of sexually explicit content than males (Greenfield, 2004).

In addition to vivid memories and negative associations, we are beginning to understand how pornography influences attitudes and behavior in adolescents. For example, we know that when male and female adolescents are exposed to a sexualized media environment they are more likely to have stronger notions of women as sex objects (Ward, 2002; Ward & Friedman, 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007), and that this association is particularly strong when audiovisual formats are consumed (e.g., television shows or Internet movies) (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Considering cable television and the Internet are the most common ways adolescents access sexual content (Häggström-Nordin et al., 2005), the influence of these media on beliefs about women are of significant concern. Moreover, the whole idea of women objectifying women is an area

that needs further examination in terms of how it affects female self-concept and social interactions.

Additionally, research conducted with first-year college students has brought forth insights into how adolescents and young adults are impacted by exposure to sexually explicit material. Zillman (2000) found that frequent exposure to pornography was associated with the following attitudes and dynamics:

- Normalization of adverse reactions to offensive material;
- Increased tolerance toward sexually explicit material, thereby requiring more novel or bizarre material to achieve the same level of arousal or interest;
- Misperceptions about exaggerated sexual activity in the general populace and the prevalence of less common sexual practices (e.g., group sex, bestiality, and sadomasochistic activity);
- Diminished trust in intimate partners;
- Decreased desire to achieve sexual exclusivity with a partner;
- Increased risk of developing a negative body image, especially for women (Siegel, 1997).
- Acceptance of promiscuity as a normal state of interaction;
- View sexual inactivity or abstinence constitute a health risk;
- Begin to view love in a cynical manner;
- Believe superior sexual satisfaction is attainable without having affection for one's partner; and
- Believe marriage is sexually confining;
- Believe raising children and having a family is as an unattractive prospect;

Exactly how these attitudes, beliefs and relational dynamics play out in the current and future lived experiences of young women is unclear; however, these research findings are consistent with what I am witnessing with young clients. Through clients, I have learned that pornography has become a major socializing agent for adolescents.

Pornography is influencing everything from how teens language and frame sexuality to how and why they pierce certain body parts to what they expect to give and receive in intimate relationships. This in turn, is influencing how young men interact with females. I am also witnessing more female adolescents tolerating emotional, physical and sexual abuse in dating relationships, feeling pressure to make out with females as a way to turn guys on, looking at or producing pornography so that their boyfriends will think they are “open-minded” and “cool”, and normalizing sexual abuse done to them because they see the same acts eroticized in pornography – after all, how bad can it be if the larger culture around you finds abusive and demeaning acts a turn on?

When compared to past generations, adolescents today are reaching puberty and engaging in sexual intercourse earlier than previous generations (Longo et al., 2002). Exactly how exposure to pornography is impacting these trends, if at all, is uncertain; however, research indicates that pornography consumption is affecting sexual behavior in young adults. Research has shown that adolescents themselves recognize that pornography influences their own sexual behavior even though they tend to believe it influences others to a larger to degree (Rogala & Tydén, 2003; Häggström-Nordin, et al., 2005).

Three separate studies that focused on adolescents and pornography use specifically found that for males and females there was a strong association between pornography consumption and engaging in oral and anal sex (Rogala & Tydén, 2003; Tydén & Rogala, 2004; Häggström-Nordin, et al., 2005) even though the majority of females described anal intercourse as a negative experience (Rogala & Tydén, 2003). Because condom use has been found to be low (40%) for many engaging in anal

intercourse (Rogala & Tydén, 2003), and the fact that there is a rise in the number of sexually transmitted diseases being contracted through genital-oral contact, the implications for the transmission of disease and other health risks needs to be considered with these behavioral trends.

Women as Consumers of Pornography

It used to be that men were the sole consumers of pornography while adult women were the primary staple of pornographic images. The Internet era, however, has fostered a level-playing field of sorts and more and more women are producing, viewing and interacting with the sex industry than ever before. Some greet this cultural shift enthusiastically, claiming that it helps women own and express their sexuality. In my office, and the offices of many of my colleagues, however, there appears to be increased insecurity, body image issues, sexual anxieties and relationship difficulties for female consumers of pornography. As well, it is not uncommon for a history of sexual abuse or trauma to be entangled in the pornography consumption, something that is consistent with Broman's (2003) findings that women who had suffered sexual trauma were more accepting of pornography than women who had not suffered sexual trauma.

Although men are 6.43 times more likely to use Internet pornography than females (Stack et al., 2004), women represent 30 percent of Internet pornography consumers (Internet Pornography Statistics, 2008; Nielsen//NetRatings, April 2005). Female consumption is further supported by a recent study of college-age students ($n = 813$) in which 31 percent of the young women reported using pornography (vs. 87 percent for men), and almost half of the women (49 percent) agreed that viewing pornography is acceptable (vs. 67 percent for men) (Carroll et al., 2008). The findings

regarding female acceptance are of particular importance because they reveal that the females surveyed were more accepting of pornography than their fathers were just one generation ago (Carroll et al., 2008).

Female patterns of usage, however, are markedly different from those of their male peers (Carroll et al., 2008). For men, “pornography use is as common as drinking is among college-age men”, and a significant number report “binging” on pornography with a similar frequency and intensity than those who binge drink (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 23). Females, who consume, on the other hand, were more likely to view pornography once a month or less, and only 3.2 percent of women reported weekly use or more. Gender differences in pornography consumption were also highlighted in Martin Hald’s (2006) study in which women were found to: (a) be exposed to pornography at a later age than male peers, (b) consume less hardcore and more softcore material than men, (c) be more likely to consume pornography with a regular sexual partner than by themselves, (d) masturbate to pornography significantly less than men, and (e) watch significantly more softcore pornography and group sex (one woman with multiple men) than men (Martin Hald, 2006).

A key finding in the Carroll et al. study (2008) was that the intellectual acceptance of pornography was as strongly correlated to attitudes and behaviors as their actual pornography consumption was. As the researchers state:

...pornography should be regarded as much as a value stance or a personal sexual ethic as it is a behavioral pattern. This may be a particularly salient finding for emerging adult women who report higher levels of acceptance than actual use of pornography. Furthermore, pornography acceptance among women was a

stronger correlate with permissive sexuality, alcohol use, binge drinking, and cigarette smoking than was actual pornography use (p. 24).

It is unclear at this point what the long term implications are for changes in female pornography consumption and acceptance, or how those changes will impact the pornography industry and society at large. The body of research that documents a wide range of effects on male consumers needs to be reexamined with a female population in mind. As a clinician, however, I have observed many of the individual effects that have been associated with male consumption in many female users. For example, many of the female consumers I have worked with experience increased difficulty in developing long-term, intimate relationships; have become desensitized to graphic material and sexual content; have less sensitive attitudes towards males; are more willing to use a male for sexual gratification while not being emotionally committed to him; and take greater risks with their sexual health. Although many would like to think that female consumption of pornography is helping women be more sexually confident and secure, my clinical observations inform me differently.

Wives of Pornography Users

Generally speaking, North American women are socialized to seek after, if not expect, marital and intimate relationships that foster equality between partners and which are founded upon mutual respect, honesty, shared power and romantic love. In stark contrast, pornography promotes and eroticizes power imbalances, discrimination, disrespect, abuse, voyeurism, objectification, and detachment – all of which represent antitheses of relational and marital ideals for Western women. Consequently, when a North American, married woman discovers her husband has been secretly consuming

pornography, it is not only devastating to her sense of self and trust, but it often threatens the very foundation upon which she has constructed and framed her relational world. She is suddenly confronted with how psychologically, spiritually and sexually split her supposedly 'modern man' really is. It is not uncommon for women in this situation to say things like, "I have no idea who he really is anymore," "I feel like I have lived a lie the entire time I have been married," or "I thought we had a good marriage until this was revealed." To add insult to injury, many wives are directly or indirectly blamed for their partner's pornography use with stinging insinuations that: (a) the marriage relationship must be dissatisfying, (b) she has 'let herself go' and is no longer as physically attractive as she once was, (c) she is closed minded to new sexual experiences, or (d) she is overly focused on her children and not attending to her husbands needs. Too often the woman's experience of the marital relationship and the historical context of his pornography habit become conveniently dismissed as irrelevant. Consequently, the husband's pornography use is justified and the effects of pornography use are unchallenged. When pornography problems are scapegoated and enabled in such a one-sided manner, the cultural chime of boys-will-be-boys is reinforced one more time and everyone loses.

When we consider that married men outnumber single men in Internet use (Burns, 2005; Cooper et. al, 2004) and that the majority of people struggling with sexual addictions and compulsivities involving the Internet are married, heterosexual males (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000), examining the impact of pornography use on wives is a logical focal point.

Several researchers have found that it is common for women to report feelings of betrayal, loss, mistrust, devastation and anger as responses to the discovery or disclosure

of a partner's pornography use and/or online sexual activity (Bridges, Bergner & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Manning, 2006; Schneider, 2000a). Some researchers have even suggested that individuals in committed relationships who discover their partner is engaged in compulsive pornography use or other sexually addictive behaviors can manifest symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Steffens & Rennie, 2006). Additionally, many women experience physiological effects such as fatigue, changes in appetite and libido, and other signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression, including suicidality (Manning, 2006; Wildmon-White & Young, 2002).

Over and above the intense emotional distress and upheaval, it is critical to acknowledge that women who are married to a pornography consumer can experience a range of very serious risks and impacts that often get dismissed amidst the minimizing, cultural mantra that "porn is harmless entertainment" or "*just* something guys do". Some of the most significant impacts on women (and society) include: (a) increased risk of marital distress, separation and divorce, (b) increased risk for contracting a sexually transmitted disease from their spouse, (c) increased isolation, and (d) increased risk for abuse.

Increased risk of marital distress, separation and divorce

Survey research conducted by Bridges, Bergner and Hesson-McInnis (2003) found married women are significantly more distressed by a partner's online pornography consumption than women in dating or cohabiting relationships, and that Internet pornography consumption is viewed as a significant threat to the marital bond. This study looked at a non-clinical sample (N = 100) who were 18 years of age or older and who had a partner involved in Internet pornography. As would be expected, the distress reported

by the women increased according to the perceived frequency of online sexual activities, and was not significantly influenced by religious beliefs. As a result, it was concluded that married women who perceived greater levels of Internet pornography consumption tended to have the greatest levels of distress than any other group of women.

When considering more extreme situations, a study by Schneider (2000a) found that cybersex addiction was a major contributing factor to separation and divorce for affected couples. This study analyzed survey responses from 94 individuals (91 women, 3 men) who (a) ranged in age from 24 to 57, (b) had been in a relationship for an average of 12.6 years (range of 0.5 to 39 years), and (c) were seeking therapy to cope with a partner's Internet involvement. The sample was recruited through 20 therapists who were treating sex addicts and who were aware of individuals who would be interested in participating in this research. Although a range of online sexual activities were listed, viewing and/or downloading pornography accompanied by masturbation was present in 100 percent of the cases.

As cited previously, important survey data was collected at the November 2002 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers in Chicago, Illinois regarding the impact of Internet usage on marriages (Dedmon, 2002). This professional organization comprises the nation's top 1600 divorce and matrimonial law attorneys who specialize in matrimonial law, including divorce and legal separation. At this meeting, 62 percent of the 350 attendees said the Internet had played a role in divorces they had handled during the last year, and 56 percent of the divorce cases involved one party having an obsessive interest in pornographic websites (Dedmon, 2002).

Increased risk for contracting a sexually transmitted disease from one's partner

An increasing number of women I have worked with clinically have learned about a partner's involvement with pornography and related infidelity through the discovery that they had contracted a sexually transmitted disease. It is particularly traumatic and life-changing for a woman who has been faithful in her marriage to learn she has a sexually transmitted disease. This type of discovery, however, is not surprising when we consider that Stack Wasserman and Kern (2004) found that individuals who completed the 2000 General Social Survey who used the Internet and had had an extramarital affair were 3.18 times more likely to have used Internet pornography than individuals who used the Internet but did not engage in affairs according to the survey data (N = 531). Additionally, the same study also revealed that people who have engaged in paid sex (i.e. prostitution) were 3.7 times more apt to use Internet pornography than those who had not engaged in paid sex. What these statistics indicate is that Internet pornography is often associated with activities that can undermine marital exclusivity and fidelity, and subsequently increase the risk of contracting and transmitting sexual diseases.

Increased isolation

Marriages in which a pornography problem or sexual compulsion exist are commonly pervaded with diminished intimacy and sensitivity, anxiety, secrecy, isolation, relationship dysfunction, and decreased temporal security due to the risk of job loss or related debts (Carnes, 1991; Schneider, 2000a; Wildmon-White & Young, 2002). Women in these marriages tend to experience loneliness and isolation because they are vulnerable to getting entangled in secret keeping in an effort to cope with the problem (Matheny, 1998). Additionally, women commonly fear they will not be understood if they do speak out, or fear the potential risks, ridicule and consequences of sharing

information (Wildmon-White & Young, 2002). As a result, most women withdraw from their typical sources of social support (Manning, 2006). Given the previously cited insinuations and types of blame I have witnessed female clients encounter, it is not surprising most withdraw or remain silent for long periods of time.

In my qualitative, doctoral research with wives of sex addicts (n = 25; 100 percent of which had reported pornography being an issue in their marriage), the majority of participants (68.18 percent) had experienced some form of isolation while dealing with this problem (e.g., emotional, spiritual, physical or social) (Manning, 2006). What was interesting about this phenomenon was that many of the women reported having strong networks of support and family ties, but described being isolated due to the shameful nature of this particular problem. This is an important dynamic to recognize because it suggests women who are high-functioning and well supported in other areas of life may still be at risk for isolation, delayed help-seeking behavior and/or prolonged psychological struggle due to the nature of the problem and the relative infancy of public awareness regarding it. Additionally, isolation can put women at risk for heightened psychological stress and turmoil if they are used to receiving support in other areas of life, thereby making this population more vulnerable overall. The common pattern of isolation underscores the need for increased public awareness and ways to connect these women to resources and supports that can help them heal.

Increased risk for abuse

A growing number of researchers and clinicians are beginning to recognize a connection between pornography use and abuse in marriage (Laaser, 1996; Wildmon-White & Young, 2002; Ryu, 2004; Hinson Shope, 2004). It is not uncommon for wives

of pornography users to report being asked to reenact pornographic scenes, consume pornography with their partner, or be pressured or coerced into sexual acts they find uncomfortable or demeaning (Laaser, 1996; Ryu, 2004; Hinson Shope, 2004). While conducting my own doctoral research (Manning, 2006), I was surprised to learn how many women had experienced marital rape when asked about how pornography had impacted their marriage. Unfortunately, my experience as a researcher was not unique. For example, Bergen (1998) found in her research on marital rape that one third of the females in her sample reported that their partner consumed pornography and that there was a correlation between pornography use and the most sadistic rapes. Sadly, these findings are not surprising when we consider that Boeringer (1994) found that men exposed to violent pornography were 6 times more likely to report rape behavior than a low-exposure sample, and Crossman (1995) found pornography use was the strongest correlate of sexual aggression. Furthermore, Cramer and McFarlane (1994) surveyed a sample of women who had been battered and found that: (a) 75 percent of the women had been shown pornography and asked or forced to perform similar sex acts; (b) 64 percent had had pornography described to them and asked or forced to perform similar sex acts; (c) 31 percent had been asked to participate in pornographic photographs; and (d) 81 percent had reported rape.

While definitive causal ties cannot be determined, it is important to recognize the correlation between pornography use and abuse in marriage for many women. As we get better at asking the right questions, I am confident that the impact of pornography on spousal abuse and oppression will come into focus. In the meantime, however, countless women are suffering.

Conclusion

Several years ago, I would have considered myself complacent if not down right indifferent about the issue of pornography. Today, I feel an urgency about this issue that often surprises me. As a North American woman and new mother, I have a deep, foreboding sense of concern over the impact of pornography is having on women, men and children. As with any cultural shift, it can be frustrating to wait for the research and societal mindset to catch up with what is happening in the trenches and in individual lives. Sadly, I must admit the truth behind the following comment by Hinson Shope (2004):

Women's experiences of pornography are dismissed as anecdotal, nonrepresentative, and unimportant. Falling into the measurement trap, we have turned to science, instead of to women, for answers...while we debate it, many are coping with its unwelcome presence in their lives (p. 69).

At the same time, I must also admit the role women themselves are playing in the growing influence of pornography. In time, it is my hope that further research, personal narratives, and the voice of concerned citizens will prevail in creating shifts that foster healthy sexuality, lasting relationships and respect for human beings as whole people.

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