

Feminism and Free Speech: Arts Censorship is part of the Feminism and Free Speech series produced by Feminists for Free Expression (FFE), a national, not-for-profit anti-censorship organization.

Recent years have seen increasing demands for censorship of artistic expression. Attacks on books in libraries, demands for censoring television and prosecutions of bookstores and museums have become a popular response to words, ideas or images that some Americans find offensive. Feminists for Free Expression is deeply concerned about this trend, for censoring disagreeable ideas will not make the disagreeable realities go away, and only distracts people's attention from addressing the real causes of social ills. Censorship harms all groups working for social change—especially women.

1. What is Arts Censorship?

● Censorship is any effort to suppress images, ideas or information. It can be imposed by government or self-imposed by artists or producers. Often, when individuals dislike art or information, they want the government to ban it directly or indirectly. The First Amendment protects artistic expression against such government restraints. Yet not all censorship is illegal. Television networks, film and music companies have the right to censor the artists whose work they produce.

● Even the government can engage in some censorship without violating First Amendment protections of free speech. For example, government may restrict libel or establish “time, place, and manner” restrictions on rock concerts. The Supreme Court has also ruled that obscenity may be censored and many of our most celebrated artists and writers have been subject to obscenity prosecutions. Among them: James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Walt Whitman, William Burroughs and Norman Mailer. In 1933, the U.S. Customs Bureau seized as obscene books containing reproductions of Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment.”

2. Why should feminists care about arts censorship?

● Feminism, like any other movement to remedy oppressive attitudes, depends on freedom of speech. Without the liberty to protest, parody, and mock sexism, and to communicate information about women’s lives (including their sexual lives), women could not have

made progress toward equality in the workplace or broken down sexist stereotypes in pop culture.

● History teaches us that once in place, censorship schemes are used to stifle feminist advocacy of social change. Birth Control pioneer Margaret Sanger was jailed under censorship laws. Today the works of artists like Holly Hughes and Judy Blume are banned—the American Library Association cites Blume as the most censored author in the country. In Canada, feminist books have been seized under the shadow of new obscenity standards that were developed with the help of American pro-censorship advocate Catherine MacKinnon. Ironically, two of the books stopped by Canadian customs were written by MacKinnon’s pro-censorship colleague, Andrea Dworkin.

3. Why is so much arts censorship about sex?

● Sex is, as the Supreme Court itself once observed, “a great and mysterious motive force in human life,” and a subject of compelling interest to most men and women. Not surprisingly, then, human sexuality is a pervasive subject in literature, film, the visual arts, and popular entertainment—and it always has been, from the days of ancient Greek vase paintings and theatrical works like *Lysistrata* to the present.

● Yet because of deeply held religious, moral and political attitudes about sex, and because of the ambivalence and intense emotion that surrounds this sensitive subject, censorship of sexual ideas and information continues. In the last 30 or so years, the Supreme Court has attempted to draw a distinction between “serious” art or literature with sexual content (which may not be censored) and obscenity that lacks “serious value” (which can be suppressed). But that distinction is fluid and difficult to apply. The result is that art about the very important subject of sex is suppressed either through prosecutions or the threat of prosecutions, campaigns to get rid of books or art exhibits, and pressure to pass laws prohibiting “indecent” materials from distribution through computers and television systems.

● The legal definition of “indecent” is even more vague than the definition of “obscenity.” As a result, a wide range of words and images—including swear words common to many American youngsters—may be prohibited under the indecency standard that the Federal Communications Committee applies to radio and television broadcasting. The result is that anything

deemed “patently offensive” and inappropriate for children may be banned, thereby reducing adults to hearing or viewing only broadcasting considered suitable for children.

4. Isn’t sexist material inherently harmful to women?

● Restrictions on sexual material—whether it is serious art or in commercial pornography—are often imposed in the name of “protecting” women. These restrictions do nothing to promote women’s equality and much to infantilize them. The theory that ideas, information, or images involving sex are inherently offensive to women only shores up destructive Victorian stereotypes of female purity and asexuality. This retrogressive notion has led to the removal of classic nude sculptures or drawings from public art exhibits. In one Pennsylvania university, a reproduction of Goya’s *Maja Desnuda* was taken down when a woman complained that the painting created a hostile environment. FFE finds it difficult to see how this advances the goals of women.

● The answer to sexist pornography or misogynistic music is not censorship, but criticism, analysis, and the production of art and entertainment that is feminist in its vision and in its exploration of the range of female interests, ideas, experiences, including women’s sexual interests.

5. Doesn’t art with violent or sexual themes harm children or influence men to adopt sexist attitudes?

● FFE not only supports but encourages parents to guide the reading, viewing and listening of their children, and to discuss with their children the many ideas they encounter—not only about sex and violence, but about sexism, racism, greed, money, religion, respect and love, and not only ideas in the arts and media, but from other children and adults. FFE believes most Americans would prefer to do this themselves rather than let a government committee decide what their children read, watch and think. Parents who neglect this aspect of their kids’ lives may neglect them in other ways. It is this neglect that needs addressing.

● No reputable research establishes a causal relationship between art or literature and criminal behavior. Despite frequent claims of a proven causal relation between exposure to “violent” television programs and aggressive behavior, most studies actually have had “null” results, and in the long run, it is probably impossible to prove specific effects from such a broad,

varied, and pervasive category of art as depictions or descriptions of violence.

● Violence flourished for centuries before commercial pictures of it; many industrialized countries with high TV viewing rates have low rates of violence (such as Western Europe and Japan), while many developing countries with low TV viewing rates have high rates of violence. Toronto and Chicago, both with populations of two million, have nearly identical TV programming, yet Chicago has a great deal of violence, while Toronto has very little. Factors other than screen images cause the difference. FFE believes longstanding economic, racial, political and family factors are the substantive cause of violence and society should address them rather than focus on the censorship of art and entertainment.

● All aspects of our culture, including the arts, influence our attitudes and ideas about the world. Art, music, advertising, the mass media, education, religious training, families and communities, all shape the kind of people we are. Each "bad" idea competes with all other ideas in individual encounters in the media, and from life's most effective teacher: real world experience. A person who learned respect for others early on will not be converted to hooliganism by the movies. Moreover, human beings are various and idiosyncratic; we each respond to art, literature, and pop culture in different ways. The value of free speech is that it permits a wide range of ideas to flourish so that individuals can grow, learn and decide for themselves what ideas to accept or reject.

● Those who want to censor "offensive" or "bad" ideas attack the very concept of freedom. They ask for a system where boards of censors decide for the rest of us what we will be able to say, hear, or think. They often misinterpret or oversimplify the artworks that they attack. Artists express the dark as well as sunny side of human life and use many techniques to dramatize their concerns—exaggeration, symbolism, metaphor, dream, and fantasy. In the long run, free and open discussion of the issues raised by artists has been the best chance of achieving feminist goals.

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FEMINISTS FOR FREE EXPRESSION

*To suppress free speech
In the name of protecting women
Is dangerous and wrong*

Betty Friedan

