

THE REAL PROBLEM WITH PORNOGRAPHY: IT'S BAD FOR SEX

By Michael Castleman

Marie Silva and her husband, Jack, both act in pornographic videos. Marie has made a modest name for herself, appearing in two dozen productions, among them: *Sex Across America 5*, *Anal Addicts 2*, and *Nasty Nymphos 31*. She looks the part, with a shaved vulva and a pierced clitoral hood. But in real life, she's nothing like the women she portrays on screen: "I play strong characters, biker chicks, dominants, and wild women [who demand sex]. But in my personal life, I'm actually very shy, never a sexual aggressor."

The stark contrast between the lives Marie and Jack live on and off camera extends to their lovemaking. They had to *learn* pornography-style sex, as they relate in *Marie and Jack: A Love Story*, a documentary about their relationship (see Resources). "Sex on camera is very raw," Marie explains, "It's wild and crazy. It can be exciting. But it's not satisfying. It's not the same as our personal sex. Jack and I have a deep emotional connection. [For sex to feel satisfying], I need more than sucking and fucking. I need emotional fulfillment."

Pornographic sex is so different from the way Marie and Jack like to make love that at the start of their video careers, they had to schedule rehearsal sessions. "We needed to practice having sex [the way the directors wanted]," Jack explains, "so we could perform correctly on camera."

Directors wanted Marie to talk dirty. "I'd never done that before. I didn't know how. Jack coached me. He'd tell me, 'Say 'Fuck me!' Say it louder.'" Directors wanted Marie to use butt plugs and do anal intercourse scenes. She'd never done anything anal, but learned how for work. "She was doing anal on camera," Jack recalls, "before we ever tried it at home." Directors insisted that Marie and Jack dispense with tenderness, sensuality, and mutual massage, and play up raw, pounding, hardcore action. That felt bizarre, Marie explains, because their lovemaking with one another had always been "tender, playful, and intimate." And directors wanted them to have intercourse in positions that would challenge a contortionist.

As they became more involved with making porn, Marie and Jack found themselves slipping into porn-style sex at home. "We'd do a movie" Jack recalls, "then the next day, have personal sex. I'd find myself holding her leg

up or doing some of the weird things you see in porn. Or she would say, ‘Harder!’ or ‘Oh, yeah!’ Then we’d stop and say, ‘Wait. We’re not machines. Let’s just make love.’”

Marie and Jack quickly learned to separate “work sex” from “personal sex.” At home, they rarely do anything anal, don’t talk dirty, and don’t use sex toys. They enjoy mutual, sensual, whole-body massage, tender caresses, with lots of eye contact. “If we were making love,” Jack says, “and all of a sudden, I pulled out and said, ‘Baby, I want to come all over your face,’ Marie would say, ‘Are you kidding? You can’t be serious.’”

Imitating Porn Ruins Sex And Causes Sex Problems

Marie and Jack understand the difference between pornographic sex performed by actors who do what they’re told to fulfill men’s fantasies, and great sex enjoyed by real lovers who do what creates mutual pleasure for the two of them. Unfortunately, millions of people who view pornography—particularly men, the target group for porn—don’t appreciate this crucial distinction.

The cultural debate over pornography’s place in society is usually couched in terms of free speech vs. censorship. Porn producers and their defenders wrap themselves in the First Amendment, and excoriate those who criticize X-rated media as Nazi prudes. Personally, I’m all for free speech and against censorship. I believe X-rated media that depicts adult sex should be freely available to adults. When I was a teen, I peeked at *Playboy* and thought it incredibly racy. *Playboy* seems so tame now, so innocent. When my two kids were teenagers, we never had any filters on our computers. They had instant free access to millions of sexually explicit images on the Internet—and I didn’t lose any sleep over their viewing them.

While I defend any adult’s right to buy and view porn, I firmly believe that the debate about pornography needs to be expanded beyond its relationship to the First Amendment. Porn has some legitimate uses in sex education and therapy (see sidebar), but ultimately, *pornography is bad for sex*. Those who use it as a guide to lovemaking are on a one-way trip to sex problems, relationship problems, and as Marie and Jack attest, unfulfilling lovemaking. Here’s why:

* Everyone in pornography is eager for sex all the time.

This can help some people overcome guilt feelings about their sexual desire (see sidebar, The Sexual Benefits of Porn), but it makes many people, particularly men, feel distressed that everyone seems to be getting more than they are. “It’s amazing,” says Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, sex therapist Dennis Sugrue, Ph.D., “how some people don’t understand that pornography presents a fantasy world, a Neverland that’s very different from the world real people live in.”

* Every man in pornography is hung like a horse.

Male porn actors are *selected for* extra-large penises. They *really are* bigger than the rest of us. Now, professional basketball players are much taller than the average man, but the typical guy doesn’t feel inadequate in comparison to them because he knows that most men are more or less his size. He has some perspective. That’s not the case with penises. Heterosexual men may see other men’s flaccid equipment from a distance in locker rooms. But other than their own, the *only* flaccid penises and erections the typical heterosexual man ever views up close hang between the legs of the guys in porn. Porn penises have become the standard by which men judge themselves, and that standard is seriously skewed toward King Kongs, or, as one porn actor was dubbed, King Dong. As a result, all the normal-sized men of the world are justified in believing that they have one of the smallest penises they’ve ever seen. No wonder men almost universally believe their penises are “too small.” Blame it on porn.

* Every man in pornography raises instant erections.

By the time the men in porn drop their pants, they have full, firm erections. This is total fiction. In fact, the dirty little secret of pornography is that porn sex is so alienating, unarousing, and stress-provoking that before Viagra, most of the male actors had trouble getting it up. Even with Viagra, now *de rigeur* on porn sets, many of the male actors continue to suffer balky erections. Some—but by no means all—men in their teens and twenties can raise instant erections from fantasy or from a glance at an alluring woman or erotic image. But past age 40 or so, most men notice that this ability fades. At every age—especially for older men—erection requires relaxation, playful, sensual touch, and for partner sex, a decent relationship with a loving partner whom you find arousing. Unfortunately, inspired by pornography, many perfectly normal men think something is wrong with

them because they're not rock hard at the drop of a zipper. "Porn encourages men to have unrealistic expectations of their penises," says Palo Alto, California, sex therapist Marty Klein, Ph.D. "Most men can't raise instant erections or become erect from simply looking. They need touch. Porn underemphasizes men's real need for direct stimulation."

* The erections in pornography never subside.

Porn actors are rock-hard from the moment you see their penises until they ejaculate. For men under 40, this may be possible. But after 40, erections change. They no longer rise from fantasy alone. Penis-stroking—perhaps extended, vigorous fondling—becomes necessary. Erections after 40 are not as firm as they once were. And if an older man becomes distracted, his erection may subside right in the middle of sex, and require more direct caresses to firm up again—if it does. None of these problems ever happen in porn.

* Every man in pornography lasts forever.

They pump, and pump, and pump even more—often thanks to deft editing. No one in porn every suffers premature ejaculation. But back in the real world, this problem, coming too soon, frustrates one-third of men in all adult age groups. Good ejaculatory control requires leisurely, playful, whole-body sensuality. That's the *opposite* of the rushed, mechanical, genitally-preoccupied sex in porn. "Imitate pornography," Sugrue explains, "and men, especially young men, are likely to ejaculate before they want to."

* Every man in pornography ejaculates on cue.

No one in porn ever suffers ejaculatory difficulties. But in real life, this problem is fairly common. One reason why men have problems ejaculating is that they don't get the stimulation they need to express orgasm. For many men, that stimulation is *not* all genital. It involves whole-body sensuality. But the men in porn come every time with little or no sensuality. Because of pornography, many men infer that whole-body sensuality doesn't matter, that all they need to let lose a major load is sucking and fucking. Wrong.

* The women's bodies are way too perfect.

Until recently, porn actresses have always been women aged 18 to 29. Porn actresses in this age group are free of facial wrinkles, and have flat bellies, firm breasts, thighs, upper arms, and buttocks. However, since the arrival of Internet porn, women in other age groups also make porn. Women in their 30s are called “MILFs” (Mothers I’d Like to Fuck.) Women in their 40s are “mature.” And women over 50 are known as “grannies.”

Nonetheless, the vast majority of women in porn are still in their late teens or 20s. In addition, many have had plastic surgery: breast enlargement, tummy tucks, liposuction—you name it. “Many men don’t understand how most women compare themselves to porn actresses,” Louanne Weston, Ph.D., a sex therapist in Fair Oaks, California, explains. “The typical woman feels very distressed that her body is nowhere near as flawless as what she sees on screen. Her man is sitting there thinking, ‘I’d love a blowjob like that.’ Meanwhile she’s thinking, ‘I’m a tub of lard.’ Women are no longer judged only by their looks. But to a great extent, women are still judged and valued based on how their physical attributes, much more than men are. Very few women look like the women in porn. When women see the men in their lives enjoying *those women* they often feel hopelessly outclassed. They fear rejection, and it’s a deep and chilling fear, one few men appreciate.”

* The women in pornography are all exhibitionists.

Have perfect body, will flaunt it, especially when it’s in the script. The women in pornography routinely flash their breasts and genitals in scenes that look as though they’re in public, and strut around naked just about anywhere. Few real women are exhibitionists—according to one study, only 1 to 2 percent. Because of their insecurities about their bodies, many women feel reluctant to reveal themselves even to the men they love. Meanwhile, men who view porn often expect their lovers to prance around in the buff and can’t understand why they insist on wearing robes until a moment before they slip into bed and pull the covers over themselves.

* Pornography-style sex is about 95 percent genital.

After a kiss or two, and a few swipes at the woman’s breasts and perhaps a bit of cunnilingus, it’s all fellatio and intercourse. Of course, the genitals are important in lovemaking, and oral sex can feel wonderful. But the genitals often don’t work right without leisurely, playful, whole-body sensuality—gentle touch all over. Pornographic sex is totally preoccupied with the

genitals. Men who imitate it are on their way to rapid, involuntary ejaculation, erectile dysfunction, and ejaculatory difficulties—and to sexually unsatisfied women. “Pornography ignores sensuality,” Sugrue says. “It’s hard to have satisfying sex without sensuality. That’s a big reason why porn-style sex isn’t satisfying. That’s also a big reason why so many women have problems with it.”

* Pornographic sex is impersonal.

Because porn is all-genital, nothing but sucking and fucking, it also depicts sex without relationships. There is never any flirting in porn, no dating, no courtship, no conversations or shared interests, no laughter, no seduction—nothing but hardcore action. Boy meets girl. They make eye contact. Her top comes off, her skirt comes up, and she’s on her knees with her mouth open. Many women find this incomprehensible—and offensive. Revolting against the sterility of pornography, former porn actress Candia Royale launched Femme Productions, a leading producer of X-rated videos with women’s sensibilities. Compared with mainstream porn, Royale’s videos develop storylines, characters, and relationships. It’s still porn, but it’s different (see sidebar, *Does Porn Arouse Women?*). Of course, Femme Productions accounts for only a tiny fraction of pornography’s output. The vast majority of X-rated media depict impersonal sex, which, many women feel demeans them.

* Every woman in porn can’t wait to fuck.

Compared with men, women usually need considerably more time to warm up before they feel comfortable with genital sexuality. They need intimate conversation and extended loveplay that includes kissing, hugging, mutual whole-body massage, and playful, creative sensuality. Porn totally ignores this very real need. Instead, it encourages men to plunge into intercourse long before women feel receptive. When surveys ask women what they dislike about the way men make love, they consistently reply that men rush into intercourse too quickly. Blame it on porn. Porn sex leaves many women cold—and turned-off women aren’t much fun in bed.

* The women in porn never experience orgasm.

This is actually the X-rated media’s only realistic element. After the man comes, known in the industry as the “money shot,” the sex is over. The

women scream and moan in the throes of supposed passion, but virtually never do they actually have orgasms. One reason is that the vast majority of porn is produced by men for men. The culture of porn has little interest in women's sexual satisfaction. In addition, given the rushed, mechanical, nonsensual nature of porn sex, under those circumstances, it's a rare woman who *could* come, even if she wanted to. No wonder so many men are in the dark about women's orgasms. They never see them in porn, and have no idea that porn-style sex leaves many women so turned off and unfulfilled that they can't possibly express orgasm. "Lots of women look at porn," Weston says, "and think: When I do it, I never get as excited as those women. Therefore, there must be something wrong with me." Of course, nothing is wrong with them. What's wrong—completely wrong—is the portrayal of women's sexuality in porn.

* Pornography ignores the unique individuality of sexual expression.

Porn sex is cookbook sex. Take two people. Get them naked. She sucks. He licks. Then they fuck in any number of acrobatic positions. Some people may enjoy making love this way, but most people prefer more variety, more creativity. Porn never shows lovers massaging each other's shoulders, or running fingers through each other's hair, or tracing fingers on the backs of knees, or sucking each other's fingers or ear lobes. All of these little moves can add zing to lovemaking. Pornography rarely shows eye contact, never zooms in to catch one lover whispering, "I love you." Nor does pornography ever show lovers asking each other, "Is this okay?" "How's this? Too light? Just right? Too intense?" Or "What can I do for you?" Porn never presents lovemaking as a sensual quest, a journey to explore what lovers find sensually arousing and fulfilling. In porn, one script fits all. "Porn sex is very narrow," Klein says. "That's why, after a while, it gets boring. Great sex doesn't become boring."

* Pornographic sex rarely involves sexual lubricants, at least on-camera.

The actors and actresses in porn use lubricant by the gallon. But viewers never see it on screen. Just as the men in porn produce instant erections, the women appear to be perpetually wet between the thighs. In fact, even with loving, playful, extended whole-body sensuality, many perfectly normal women don't produce much vaginal lubrication. To enjoy intercourse comfortably, many women *need* a commercial sex lubricant. You'd never know this from watching pornography. As a result, many men push too

quickly into poorly lubricated vaginas, and then blame it on the woman: “She’s too tight.” Meanwhile, many women suffer pain on intercourse, which ruins sex for them.

* In pornography, oral sex is universal.

Every woman sucks, and every man licks. This significantly overstates the popularity of oral sex in America’s bedrooms. According to the best current sex research—studies at the University of Chicago and the University of California in the 1990s—only about 25 to 50 percent of lovers routinely engage in oral sex. For porn viewers who receive less oral than they’d like, the ubiquity of oral sex in porn creates the impression that everyone in the world is getting head every time—except them.

* Oral sex in pornography is too intense.

The men in porn plunge into cunnilingus like parched dogs presented with bowls of water. Pornographic fellatio is not much different. The women are often quite rough on the penises they suck. Many people prefer gentler oral caresses. In fact, for many women, the clitoris is so sensitive that direct tonguing, no matter how gentle, feels uncomfortable. Some women prefer men to lick the clitoris very gently, or to lick around it, but not directly on it. Others enjoy a tongue directly on the clitoris—but only after considerable licking around it. You’d never know this from watching porn. “Oral sex in pornography is like slapstick in theater,” Weston says. “overdone for effect. Enjoyable sex is gentler.”

* Anal sex in pornography is totally unrealistic.

Not all porn includes anal play, but any video with “anal” in the title typically focuses on just one type of anal sex, penis-in-anus intercourse—with a vengeance. In fact, among real lovers, this is the *least* popular form of anal play. Most anal sex involves sphincter massage or gentle fingering. In addition, porn actors rarely take the time to use lubricant. The inserter never asks the recipient, “Is this okay?” And the inserter pushes in too deeply too quickly, and then pumps in and out much too vigorously. No wonder so many people complain that anal sex hurts. Imitate porn and it’s bound to. “The presentation of anal sex in porn is ridiculous,” Klein says. “It’s totally unrealistic how much everyone enjoys it. And on camera, it’s totally unlubricated. The actors lube up off-camera, but viewers never see it. All the

audience sees is huge erections plunging into little rosebuds.” To make matters worse, some anal sex in porn is so unsanitary that it’s medically hazardous. “I’ve seen videos where the guy’s erection goes right from the woman’s anus into her vagina or mouth,” Sugrue recalls. “No one should ever do that.”

* Pornography ignores contraception.

Viewers may infer that they can, too. This is a big mistake for two reasons. First, unprotected sex risks unwanted pregnancy. Second, sex without birth control often makes one lover—or both—feel anxious, producing stress that reduces the pleasure of lovemaking and contributes to sex problems.

* Pornography ignores sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Except for a brief period in the early 1980s when the pornography industry panicked about AIDS, very few people in porn use condoms, and STIs are never mentioned. “Pornography is one big fantasy of sexual abundance with no responsibility,” Sugrue says.

* Pornography is extremely internally consistent.

Motion pictures were invented in 1890. By 1891, pornography was being produced. Recently, some of the first pornographic movies have been released on video (see Resources). The actors’ clothing and hairstyles are antique, but the sex in century-old porn looks remarkably like the sex in porn today. Porn sex is The Big Lie told over and over and over again. Because all porn depicts the same sexual style, viewers infer that rushed, mechanical, nonsensual, genitally preoccupied porn sex is the way lovemaking should be.

* Finally, pornography has become the single most influential sex educator in the country.

A generation ago, widely available sex media consisted of softcore *Playboy*, somewhat raunchier *Penthouse*, and a dozen other girlie magazines. Pornography was confined to seedy theaters and sex shops tucked away on the wrong side of the tracks, accessible only to a small fraction of adults. Today, that era feels quaint. These days, home pages of more than 100 million pornographic Web sites are easily available in every home with an

Internet connection. You don't even have to look for them. Junk email for everything from "Horny Housewives" to "Teenage Anal Gangbangs" fill inboxes. Access requires a credit card, but what you can see for free could make Hugh Hefner's hair curl. Meanwhile, the sheer volume of Internet porn persuades many viewers that porn sex is the way sex should be. While there are some legitimate uses for pornography in sex education and therapy, on balance, pornography is bad—*very bad*—for sex. Pornography is like the chase scenes in action movies—exciting and fun to watch, but definitely not the way to drive.