

The porn debate

Should we unban pornography in this new South Africa?

This is one issue we must debate now.

Colleen Howell looks at the different arguments

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ou are walking down the street. On both sides, on big billboards, are pictures of naked women — advertisements for

pornographic movies. You walk into a shop selling magazines. Again there are pictures showing women being tied up, beaten ... and supposedly enjoying it. In many countries, where pornography is allowed, this is a reality.

Should it be allowed in the new South Africa? The bill of rights in the new constitution guarantees many rights that have been denied people in South Africa before. All people now have the right to be treated equally. There shall be no discrimination on the grounds of, for example, race, language, class, gender, disability or religion.

The constitution says every person's dignity must be respected and protected. All people also have the right to freedom of speech and political activity.

The right of women to be treated as equals is therefore generally guaranteed under the new law.

But many people are worried that practices and attitudes which discriminate against women will continue to grow in

What is pornography?

The dictionary says pornography is the description or image of sexual acts in media like magazines, books and films. This is a very broad explanation and does not really explain why many people find pornography insulting to women.

Feminist writers say that there is a difference between what is called erotica, and pornography. Erotica, they say, shows people in a sexual way which does not degrade and humiliate them in any way and which presents men and women as equal participants in a sexual act.

Pornography, on the other hand, shows people in a sexual way, particularly women, in positions where they are being humiliated, abused and exploited. For example, many pornographic images show women's bodies being cut and tied up in painful and degrading positions. Those who benefit from pornography, often wrongly claim that women enjoy being raped, battered or humiliated.

South Africa. One concern is that the pornography industry could grow in this country. Until now, pornography has been banned. Ironically, this industry may be able to use the new democratic laws to promote itself and make a lot of money from pornographic material.

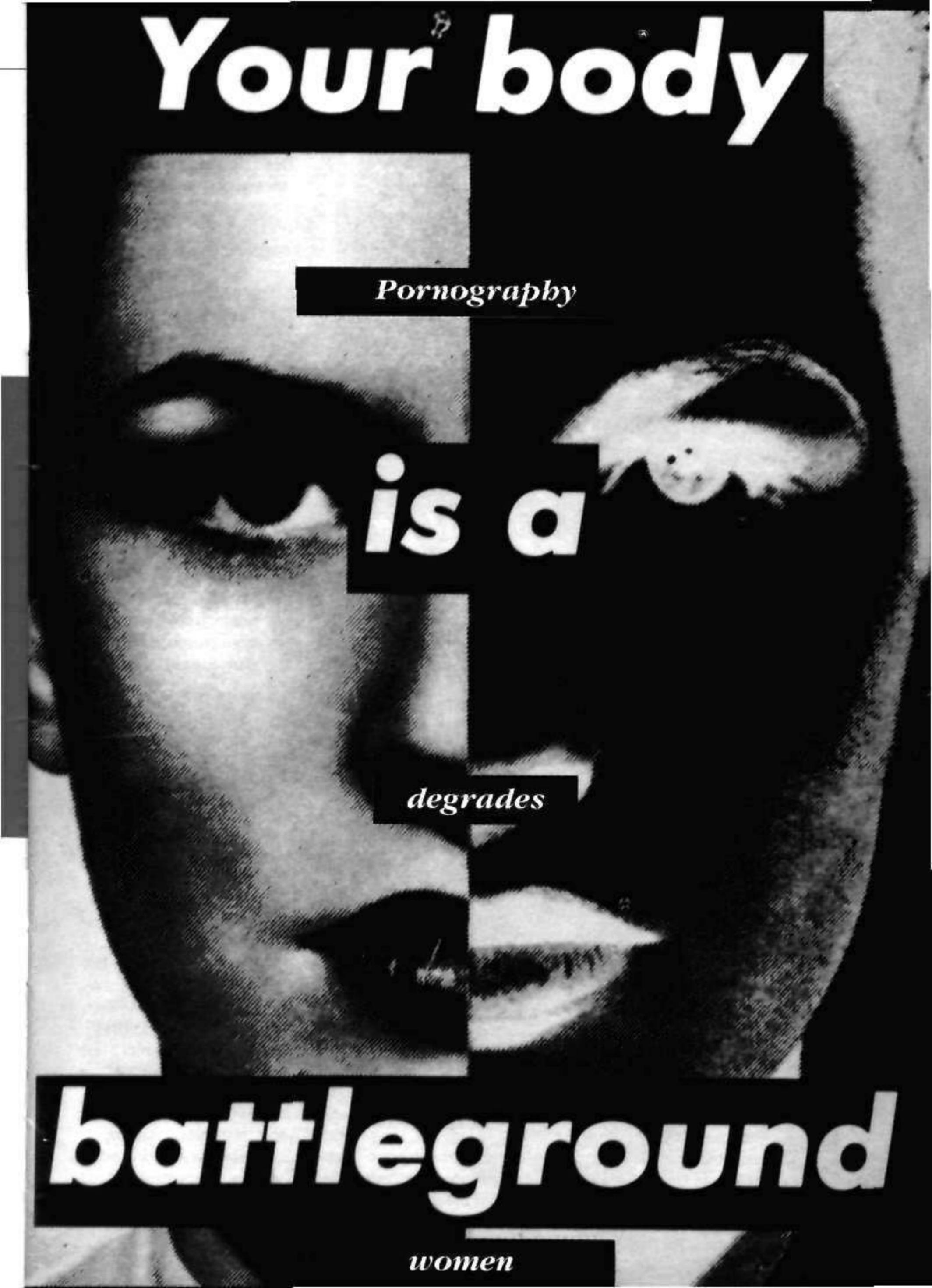
But there is serious concern that making pornography legal could promote violence against women.

This is because pornography projects violence against women as sexually exciting and accept-

able. It undermines women's dignity.

It is also argued that pornography strengthens racist attitudes. Much of the pornographic material in the United States of America shows white men raping, beating and humiliating black women.

Although it is difficult to prove how much pornography affects people's behaviour, history has shown that discrimination against particular groups of people has been strengthened by pictures showing those people as



Your body

Pornography

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women

lower and powerless. In this country, we have seen how racism against black people was strengthened by images of black people as powerless to control their own lives and being inferior to whites. For example, showing blacks only as workers. These are some of the reasons why many argue that pornography undermines the equality of women.

It is also argued that pornography violates principles in the constitution such as freedom from discrimination, the right to dignity and equality in our society.

Should we just continue to ban it then? It is not that simple.

It has already been said that all people have the right to freedom of expression. This means that every person has the right to have their own ideas and beliefs and to be able to express them. Under apartheid this basic human right was denied. Harsh laws were placed on what people could say, read, watch on television or in films. Censorship was an important tool used by the apartheid government to keep minority rule and to control the lives of individuals.

If we are to build a culture of human rights in South Africa and protect the rights of all people, then this kind of control over people's lives must stop.

For this reason, many argue that pornography should not be restricted because people have a

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How can we ensure that people's right to freedom of expression is respected but at the same

time make sure that women do not continue to be abused, violated and exploited?

There are many different opinions on how we can deal with this problem and it will be up to women to make their voices heard on this issue.

Some argue for laws which restrict the development and distribution of pornographic material. Others say this would be a

form of censorship which would restrict people's right to freedom of expression and may not in any way solve the problem. In the past, they say, although heavy restrictions on pornography existed, people still had access to it. So, will restrictions prevent the pornography industry from growing in South Africa?

Whichever way we look at it, a lot of work has to be done to change existing attitudes towards pornography.

The ideal would be a society where no-one would want to read or look at pornographic material. That might not be possible.

We must educate people about why pornography offends women and how it badly affects human sexuality.

Moreover, by empowering women and providing them with skills and courage to take control of their own lives, we can challenge images which show them as sex objects and passive. ✪