Is the Dissemination of Pornography Harmful to Women?

Professor Laurence Goldstein  
(Dept. of Philosophy, The University of Hong Kong)

Pornography is widely available in Hong Kong, and it circulates freely in many schools. Some feminists argue that pornography should be banned because it encourages views which lead to the subordination of women and unequal and unfair treatment of them. Ronald Dworkin responds that it would be unconstitutional to ban speech directly advocating the subordination of women and unequal treatment for them, so clearly we cannot ban something which might indirectly be promoting the same end.

Another argument Dworkin considers is that pornography, by subordinating women, causes them to be taken less seriously and so to have less political power because of the way they are perceived. This would amount to depriving women of a positive liberty. Yet imposing a ban on pornography would conflict with the First Amendment to the American Constitution which allows freedom of expression even though the ideas disseminated in exercising this freedom have consequences undesirable for positive liberty.

One important but overlooked consideration is that a relevant perspective on this problem may be in principle inaccessible to one half of the population. Hong Kong may soon have a Bill of Rights. In respect of its handling of pornography, should it follow the American Constitution or are there compelling moral considerations that support a divergent treatment?