



23 January 2017

Ms Dubravka Simonovic

UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women

By email: vaw@ohchr.org

**Young Women's Advisory Group Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on
Violence against Women**

YWAG would like to thank the Special Rapporteur for the opportunity to make a submission on young women's experiences of respectful relationships and sex education in the context of violence prevention.

About the Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG)

The Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) to the Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) is an independent group of ten young women aged 18-30 across Australia bringing young women's voices and perspectives to the national policy space.

The ERA is Australia's largest network advocating for women's equality, leadership, and recognition of women's diversity. As one of five National Women's Alliances, ERA brings together 62 organisations, and is led by the YWCA Australia with funding from the Federal Office for Women. YWAG works under this umbrella to inform ERA projects at a national level, and to direct our own projects.

YWAG's current focus is on strengthening sex education in Australia through our project: Let's Talk: Young Women's Views on Sex Education. Let's Talk captures and amplifies the voices and experiences of young women in relation to sex education in order to improve comprehensive sexuality and respectful relationships education in the national curriculum.

Young women's experiences of respectful relationships education

To develop the Let's Talk project, YWAG created an online survey based on a literature review of sex education in Australia, including topics that were identified as gaps in sex education (e.g. social and gendered aspects of sexual health, prevention of gender-based violence, and respectful relationships).



We consulted with a range of experts in sexuality and relationships education and violence prevention to make sure the survey was appropriate and robust. Experts included sexual and reproductive health professionals, researchers and academics, youth workers, teachers, and women's services.

The survey was one of the first in Australia to ask young women about their experiences of sexuality education, as well as to investigate whether it met their needs in developing healthy and safe relationships. YWAG's findings were released in 2016, and overwhelmingly demonstrated that sexuality education in Australia is in need of reform.

The online survey was opened from Thursday 28 May 2015 (International Day of Women's Health) to Friday 21 July 2015 and promoted to national and local networks, including youth organisations, sexual health and women's organisations, universities, and social media. Hard copy surveys were also available at participating organisations for young women who could not complete the survey online. We surveyed 1,162, 16-21 year olds across Australia. Of those surveyed 1011 identified as women. Alongside the survey, three focus groups were facilitated by self-selecting young women in their local communities and networks, using a tool-kit we had created for this purpose.

Experiences of sex education were negative, both in terms of the way it made participants feel and the content provided. Participants reported feeling unsafe because of homophobia and transphobia, and the exclusion of diverse genders and sexualities from their formal sex education.

Participants also provided examples of information being irrelevant or poorly communicated. Sex was also framed negatively, abstinence was promoted and pleasure was not discussed at all. Gender and sexual diversity was reported as being mentioned only or was negatively associated with HIV/AIDS and in some cases, immorality.

Participants also felt that sex education needed a greater focus on the areas of contraception and STIs, respectful relationships, consent, and where to access help and information around sexual health and sexual assault. The young women also called for sexuality and relationships education to shift away from promoting abstinence, shaming and victim blaming, and toward exploring safer sex, as well as positive and healthy relationships.

Sex and relationships education in Australian in schools is currently failing young women. Discussions in our focus groups, for example, showed that young women do have, and enact, agency to build on their knowledge of sex and relationships beyond the classroom. However, it is also evident that school education has many areas to improve on to fulfil its role in the sex and respectful relationships education of young women and people.

Violence Prevention and Respectful Relationships Education

Young women deserve to experience positive and safe relationships with their family, friends, and loved ones. Knowing the difference between respectful versus disrespectful relationships and behaviour, including early warning signs, is vital to helping prevent intimate partner violence, as well as making it easier to seek help. Prominent researchers in the field of violence prevention have long advocated for



addressing sexual violence through prevention education.¹ Violence (and the absence of) is seen as intimately connected to the concept of sexual health,² and there is a clear link to integrate it with traditional sex education with relationships education. For instance, engaging young people in ideas of consent and decision making equips them with skills to maintain their sexual and reproductive health (e.g. promoting safe sex and use of condoms) as well as maintain respectful relationships to prevent gender-based violence.³

The results of our survey overwhelmingly found that young women were not getting the education they needed on respectful relationships. Less than half of respondents had been educated about relationships (40.4%). Only 37% of respondents agreed that sex education had made them feel confident in their understanding of relationships, with 48% disagreeing to some extent. One survey participant felt that she needed to be “Provide[d] education/ examples on a range of healthy relationships and subsequently discuss when and why one is unhealthy.”

Recommendations

YWAG proposes the following eight key components are embedded, in an age-appropriate way, within sexuality and respectful relationships education in Australian schools. Informed by the views of young women around Australia, these core components will work to empower young people to look after their sexual health and wellbeing, and build skills for developing positive and safe relationships:

1. Informed consent
2. Positive and Respectful Relationships
3. A healthy and informed approach to sex
4. Gender and sexual diversity
5. Relationships and technology
6. Bodies
7. Reproductive health
8. Sexual health

¹ Carmody M. (2009) “Conceptualising the prevention of sexual assault and the role of education”, ACCSSA Issues, No. 10, Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Available at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/issue/i10.html>; Carmody, M., Evans, S., Krogh, C., Flood, M., Heenan, M. & Ovenden, G. (2009) Framing best practice: National Standards for the primary prevention of sexual assault through education, National Sexual Assault Prevention Education Project for NASASV, Australia, University of Western Sydney, Available at: <http://www.nasasv.org.au/Standards.html>.

² Ollis, D. (2011) “A ‘Respectful Relationships’ Approach: Could it be the answer to preventing gender based violence?”, Redress, vol. 20. no. 2, pp. 19-26, Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30041106>.

³ Powell, A. (2010) Sex, Power and Consent: Youth culture and the unwritten rules, Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press.



Moving Forward

We have attached a copy of our report, **Let's Talk: Young Women's Views on Sex Education**, to provide further information.

Should it be deemed appropriate, YWAG would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Special Rapporteur during her visit to Australia. We have three members in both Sydney and Melbourne, as well as a member in each of Brisbane, Canberra, Hobart, and Perth.

Best wishes,

Kate Robinson, Jill Moran, and Jamila Fontana on behalf of the Young Women's Advisory Group