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Submission to the inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools

Introduction

The Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) of the Equality Rights Alliance is a group of 10 women under the age of 31. We have representatives from across the country, including Queensland, bringing young women's voices and perspectives to the national policy space.

In 2015, YWAG surveyed over 1000 young women aged 16-21 nationally about their experiences of sexuality and relationships education at school (13.7% of respondents were from Queensland). We have attached our *Let's Talk: Young Women's Views on Sex Education* report which details our findings.

In late 2016 YWAG launched our report *A Whole Generation Out Of Date* which captures the findings of three focus groups run as part of the Let's Talk: Young Women's Views on Sex Education project, including two in Brisbane.¹

YWAG believes that it is crucial for young women's voices to be included in the development of the sex education and respectful relationships education curriculum, to ensure that it empowers young people to look after their sexual health and wellbeing.

This submission focuses on sex education, and sees sexuality education and respectful relationships as inextricably linked. Respectful relationships education should aim to address attitudes and norms that drive violence against women, while sexuality education provides the crucial information required by young people to manage their sexual health and wellbeing and have healthy intimate relationships.

¹ See further: <http://reports.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/ywag/lets-talk/>

Summary of Recommendations

1. YWAG recommends that the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education is compulsory in in and accessible to all Queensland schools.

2. YWAG recommends that the Queensland Government embed the following eight key components, in an age-appropriate way, within sexuality and relationships education in schools:

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

3. YWAG recommends that content about young people's use of digital technology in their relationships, including sexting practices:

- is included in sexuality and relationships education
- addresses attitudes and norms which create hurtful and abuse behaviours (eg non-consensual sharing of images)
- avoids educational approaches which demonise all sexting behaviours, victim-blame, or put the onus on young women to prevent their own abuse through non-consensual sharing of images

4. YWAG recommends that the Queensland Government reform the law to address the criminalisation of young people's consensual sexting behaviours, similar to the Victorian Government's amendments in 2013

5. YWAG recommends a strong emphasis on student-centred, strengths-based approach in outcomes, including students as having agency to manage health, safety and wellbeing, and manage positive, respectful relationships in person and online

6. YWAG recommends that the Queensland Government support quality training, professional development and support for teachers, that is informed by young people, to deliver the curriculum

Comprehensive sex education as a human right

In 2016, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirmed the right to sexual and reproductive health as an integral part of the right to health enshrined in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). Crucially, the committee said that when combined with other parts of the ICESCR, including the right to education and the right to non-discrimination and equality between men and women, there is “a right to education on sexuality and reproduction that is comprehensive, non-discriminatory, evidence-based, and scientifically accurate and age appropriate”.²

YWAG believes that all young people should have access to evidence-based, comprehensive sexuality education, with the goal being to provide young people with the knowledge and skills to manage their sexual health and wellbeing, and healthy relationships, throughout their lives.

Sex education in Queensland

YWAG’s survey of over 1,000 young women aged 16-21 found that sex education is failing young women and girls across Australia, with almost two thirds (63%) of survey respondents nationally reporting that they were not taught about consent in their sex education at school, and 76% reporting that they had not learnt anything from their sex education classes in school that had helped them when dealing with sex and respectful relationships.

Sex education is not compulsory in Queensland schools, with the principal making the decision about whether a school provides sex education. The *Queensland Sexual Health Strategy 2016-2021* states that the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education, including relationships and sexuality education, is “available for delivery by all Queensland schools”, but does not require its implementation.

This is despite the Strategy acknowledging: “School based education programs for children and young people are a critical starting point for promoting positive sexual health outcomes, minimising harm and reducing stigma and discrimination.”³

The Strategy sets out two priority actions particularly relevant to this inquiry:

- 2.2: Expand implementation of the Australian Curriculum, health and physical education – relationships and sexuality education for students in Years P-10 to promote optimal sexual and reproductive health, minimise harm, reduce stigma and discrimination and highlight the importance of respectful relationships and violence prevention
- 2.3: Expand current relationships and sexuality education to extend to students in Years 11 and 12 in Queensland schools

YWAG asked survey respondents what their experience of sex education had been like. The following responses are from young women aged 16-21 who attended school in Queensland:

“Short and vague, more a biology lesson than telling us how to be careful and safe”

² United Nations Economic and Social Council, ‘General comment No 22 (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health (article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)’ (2 May 2016), http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2fC.12%2fGC%2f22&Lang=en

³ Queensland Health, *Queensland Sexual Health Strategy 2016-21*, 24.

"I believe that sometimes sex ed was very brief and sometimes not informative enough for me to be 100% sure I knew what was happening with my body. I ended up purchasing a book and that it where I learnt the majority of my sexual education."

"It wasn't the most informative, I learnt more from my friends"

"Average, didn't really cover enough topics. It really should've covered and emphasised consent more, and what consent means and that consent should be taken seriously"

"I have never really had any proper or ongoing sex education, only like one or two sessions over 6 years"

"It was a complete joke to be honest. They basically told us not to have sex"

"It was clear that the purpose of the education was to create a feeling of fear around sex. It was overall extremely disappointing... I feel that teachers feel far too uncomfortable talking about sex, probably because they didn't receive sex education. Definitely more training needed."

"Sex education has mostly focused on the things that can go wrong rather than building a safe space in which prevention can be discussed. Many of the topics covered also did not relate to real life scenarios, for example consent was never a major focus of discussion but has been a complex issue that has re-occurred in my real life relationships. Alternative sexualities were also never supported, how to be safe in a lesbian or gay relationship and the types of acts associated with it were never addressed, which was a central concern for me when entering into relationships. It presented a very cis-gendered heteronormative account of sexual activities without acknowledging the role of pleasure in sex."

"In primary school it was mainly about puberty. In secondary school it was abstinence only, with a particular emphasis on sti's and waiting for marriage. One of my least favourite moments was when an educator said that any woman who gave a blow job couldn't respect herself. I also remember being told that sex makes a woman fall in love, and that it makes a man say he's in love during the moment but that he won't really mean it."

"It fell short of what it should have been."

"I feel it is actually largely irrelevant to me. It was incredibly heteronormative and about preventing pregnancy and STIs. As a lesbian I had no worry about pregnancy but no mention was made about how same sex female couples can avoid STIs and I feel like it's an important topic."

"Not very informative and never felt I could ask questions"

The data indicates that sexuality and relationships education in Queensland state schools is often delivered in a piecemeal fashion. Students do not necessarily receive education in every year level, and when education is received, it may only be for one to two hour-long lessons from a third-party provider. In only two hours of education a year, there is little capacity to meaningfully include content around technology, and its implications for relationships and sexual ethics, in addition to core topics including puberty, contraception and sexual health, and respectful relationships.

Sexuality and relationships education needs to be given greater priority, and more significantly incorporated into the Queensland curriculum for young people to develop understanding of the ethics and legalities of technology in relation to sex and relationships. Such education also requires accountability from Government to ensure it is accessible across Queensland regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic background, cultural background, education sector or religious affiliation.

YWAG recommends that the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education is compulsory in and accessible to all Queensland schools.

YWAG recommends that the Queensland Government embed the following eight key components, in an age-appropriate way, within sexuality and relationships education in schools:

1. Informed consent
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Young people's relationships, the use of technology and sex education

Young people's voices and experiences are under-represented in both existing scholarly literature and from contemporary Australian policy debates about the use of digital technology in their relationships.

Based on our research and consultation with young people, particularly women, YWAG supports the view that the sharing of intimate images is part of normal part of contemporary sexual activity, relationships and dating for young people, a finding that is supported by academic literature.⁴ In our consultations, young people have shared with us stories of the fun side of sharing images, namely flirting or in healthy relationships, the risky and negative side, where they may have felt harassed or had their consent violated and trust broken by partners and friends, and the strategies they use to protect themselves, including watermarking images or not including identifying features.⁵

YWAG notes that young people in Australia do not identify with the terminology of sexting, viewing it as originating with adults and fear-mongering attitudes, but nonetheless understand the term.⁶

Several studies point to the gendered sociocultural context in which sexting takes place, including the tendency for young women to be both coerced into sexting, as well as shamed and harassed for

⁴ Walker, Shelley, Lena Sanci, and Meredith Temple-Smith, 'Sexting: Young Women's and Men's Views on Its Nature and Origins' (2013) *Journal of Adolescent Health* 52:697-701; See Yeung, Timothy H., Danielle R. Horyniak, Alyce M. Vella, Margaret E. Hellard, and Megan S. C. Lim. 2014. Prevalence, correlates and attitudes towards sexting among young people in Melbourne. *Sexual Health* 11:332-339.

⁵ See also Albury, Kath, Kate Crawford, Paul Bryon, and Ben Mathews. 2013. *Young People and Sexting in Australia: Ethics, Representation and the Law*. Sydney: UNSW, ARC Centre for Creative Industries and Innovation.

⁶ Kath Albury, Kate Crawford, Paul Bryon and Ben Mathews, *Young People and Sexting in Australia: Ethics, Representation and the Law* (2013).

engaging in the practice in comparison with their male peers.⁷ The shame and sexualisation of young women's bodies appears to be important part of the gendered nature of sexting.⁸

"We had speakers come to the school once and discuss sexting but I believe there should be more of a focus on not betraying the trust of someone rather than on the person who sent the nudes." (Survey respondent, 2015)

Current educational campaigns about young people's sexting practices are failing young people in a number of ways:

- Most take an 'anti-sexting' approach, warning young people (particularly girls) of the dangers of the practice with the aim of preventing sexting.⁹ This approach was criticised by the Victorian Law Reform Committee, who found that portraying sexting as inherently risky would not resonate with young people and therefore not contribute to behavioural change.¹⁰
- Many perpetuate gender inequalities and norms which blame young women for their victimisation.¹¹
- Many are tied to the technology rather than offline relationships and behaviours that show up in technology use.¹²

YWAG recommends that content about young people's use of digital technology in their relationships, including sexting practices:

- is included in sexuality and relationships education
- addresses attitudes and norms which create hurtful and abuse behaviours (eg non-consensual sharing of images)
- avoids educational approaches which demonise all sexting behaviours, victim-blame, or put the onus on young women to prevent their own abuse through non-consensual sharing of images

⁷ Shelley Walker, Lena Sancu and Meredith Temple-Smith, 'Sexting and young people; Expert's views' (2013) *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 24 (3); Kath Albury, and Kate Crawford, 'Sexting, consent and young peoples' ethics: Beyond Megan's Story' (2012) *Continuum* 26 (3); ; Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose, 'Sext education pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyears of Tagged and Exposed' (2016) *Sex Education* 16 (1); Timothy H Yeung, Danielle R Horyniak, Alyce M Vella, Margaret E Hellard and Megan S C Lim, 'Prevalence, correlates and attitudes towards sexting among young people in Melbourne' (2014) *Sexual Health* 11; Amy Adele Hasinoff, 'Sexting as media production: Rethinking social media and sexuality' (2012) *New Media & Society* 15 (4).

⁸ Timothy H Yeung, Danielle R Horyniak, Alyce M Vella, Margaret E Hellard and Megan S C Lim, 'Prevalence, correlates and attitudes towards sexting among young people in Melbourne' (2014) *Sexual Health* 11.

⁹ Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose, 'Sext education: pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed' (2016) *Sex Education* 16(1), 9.

¹⁰ Victorian Parliamentary Law Reform Committee, *Inquiry into sexting* (May 2013), 58.

¹¹ Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, 'Blurred Lines? Responding to 'Sexting' and Gender-based Violence among Young People' (2014) *Children Australia* 39 (2); Kath Albury, and Kate Crawford, 'Sexting, consent and young peoples' ethics: Beyond Megan's Story' (2012) *Continuum* 26 (3); Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose, 'Sext education pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyears of Tagged and Exposed' (2016) *Sex Education* 16 (1).

¹² Teresa Swist, Philippa Collin, Jane McCormack and Amanda Third, *Social Media and the Wellbeing of Children and Young People: A Literature Review* (2015), report for the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia, 57.

Legal framework

The discrepancy between the legal age for consensual sex (16 years), and for the creation of sext images (18 years) has been shown to be a cause of concern and require legal reform in the eyes of both experts and young people themselves.¹³

It is important that laws on the sharing of intimate images are reflective of this reality, and do not lead to young people being prosecuted for engaging in normal, healthy and consensual sexual behaviours, for example with child pornography and child exploitation material charges.

YWAG's consultations with young people have revealed that young people are often unaware that they can be prosecuted for child pornography offences when in possession of intimate images of other young people, that such a law is disconnected from their realities, in which sending and receiving intimate images is a normal sexual practice, and that young people have concerns about the implications of such a law.¹⁴

YWAG is also concerned about the way that the current legal framework prevents young people from accessing information and support about appropriate and inappropriate sexting behaviours. A recent report by the Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council found that of 3,3035 offenders dealt with by the criminal justice system in Queensland for child exploitation material in the past ten years, 1,498 were under 17 years of age.¹⁵ The report acknowledges that young people are being captured by the criminal justice system for sexting behaviours. While this is the case, young people will be reluctant to speak to trusted adults in their life about sexting, and educators are unable to speak openly about how young people can engage in healthy and positive relationships in the digital environment.

Without law reform,¹⁶ education about sex and relationships and the use of digital technology will not be able to adequately support young people.

YWAG recommends that the Queensland Government reform the law to address the criminalisation of young people's consensual sexting behaviours, for example similar to the Victorian Government's amendments in 2014.

¹³ Michael Salter, Thomas Crofts and Murray Lee, 'Beyond Criminalisation: Sexting, gender and young people' (2013) *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 24 (3); Shelley Walker, Lena Sancic and Meredith Temple-Smith, 'Sexting and young people; Expert's views' (2013) *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 24 (3).

¹⁴ Kath Albury, Kate Crawford, Paul Bryon, and Ben Mathews, *Young People and Sexting in Australia: Ethics, Representation and the Law* (2013).

¹⁵ Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council, *Sentencing Spotlight on...child exploitation material offences* (2017).

¹⁶ For example, in line with the reforms in Victoria in 2014 which provided an exemption from child pornography offences to "provide protection for minors who produce, procure or possess images of themselves or their peers". See further: Explanatory memorandum to *Crimes Amendment (Sexual Offences and Other Matters) Bill 2014* (Vic) and *Crimes Act 1968* (Vic), s 70AAA.

What other improvements can be made to sex and relationships education in Queensland?

In addition to being compulsory, sex education should be of high quality, evidence-based, and meaningfully integrated into the school curriculum. Provision of one-off classes will not be adequate to give young people the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage their sexual health and wellbeing, and have healthy relationships.

National research by La Trobe University found that less than half of sexual health teachers received pre-service training, and most relied on ad hoc, one off in-service session for professional development.¹⁷ Comprehensive sexuality and relationships education requires resourcing to support quality training, professional development, and support for teachers which is accurate, sensitive, and evidence based training. Building the capacity, confidence and skills of teachers and schools to support discussion around technology, sexuality and sexual ethics, is crucial for young people to receive continuous and sufficient sex education to be able to negotiate healthy intimate relationships.

YWAG recommends a strong emphasis on student-centred, strengths-based approach in outcomes, including students as having agency to manage health, safety and wellbeing, and manage positive, respectful relationships in person and online

YWAG recommends that the Queensland Government support quality training, professional development and support for teachers, that is informed by young people, to deliver the curriculum

Conclusion

YWAG thanks the committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to its inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland state schools.

For further information or to discuss the content of this submission, please contact Hannah Gissane, Projects Coordinator for the Equality Rights Alliance, at era.projects@ywca.org.au.

¹⁷ Smith A., Schlichthorst M., Mitchell A., Walsh J., Lyons A., Blackman P., Pitts M, 'Sexuality Education in Australian Secondary Schools 2010' (2011), Monograph Series No. 80, University, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society.