



National Office
Department of Social Services
71 Athllon Drive
Greenway ACT 2900
By email: FourthActionPlan@dss.gov.au

16th October 2018

Submission to the Commonwealth Consultation for the Fourth Action Plan 2019-2022 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to consultations for the Fourth Action Plan.

The Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) of the Equality Rights Alliance is a group of ten women under the age of 31. We are young women from across Australia, and both urban and rural contexts, who aim to bring young women's voices and perspectives to the national policy space.

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 within relationships.

Priorities recognised for the Fourth Action Plan¹ that are particularly relevant to this submission include:

- reducing violence against women and their children through prevention activities
- reducing sexual violence
- addressing technology-facilitated abuse

¹ See the Fourth Action Plan 2019-2022 Background and Evidence Paper. Available from <https://plan4womenssafety.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan/the-fourth-action-plan-2019-2022/>.

YWAG recognises that young women aged 18-24 are at the highest risk of experiencing violence and sexual assault,² and particularly the unique experiences of young women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, young women from women culturally and linguistically diverse communities, young women with disabilities and young LGBTQI+ women facing domestic violence. We would also like to acknowledge the barriers they may face when reporting violence and accessing domestic violence services. An intersectional approach to domestic violence prevention is vital.

This submission focuses on sex education and respectful relationship education and sees the two as inextricably linked. 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 violence against women, 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.³ Violence (and the absence of) is seen as intimately connected to the concept of sexual health, and there is a clear link to integrate it with traditional sex education with relationships education. Engaging young people in ideas of consent and decision making equips them with skills to maintain respectful relationships to prevent gender-based violence.⁴ Respectful relationship education is necessary to help those who are most likely to experience domestic violence, for instance helping survivors recognise past and potential future abusive behaviour to prevent repeating a pattern of violence.

In 2015, YWAG surveyed over 1000 young women aged 16-21 across Australia about their experiences of relationships and sexuality educations at school. From the survey, in 2016 we published a report entitled *Let's Talk: Young Women's Views on Sex Education*⁵ which details our

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013), [Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2013. Personal Safety, Australia 2012, Cat. No. 4906.0](#). Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

³ 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>.

⁴ Powell, A. (2010) Sex, Power and Consent: Youth culture and the unwritten rules, Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press.

⁵ See attached or YWAG. Let's Talk: Young women's views on sex education. Equality Rights Alliance 2016. Available from <http://www.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Lets-Talk-Final-Report.pdf>.

findings, and which we have attached to this submission. Young women overall did not feel confident about their understanding of respectful relationships after sex education. We enclose the Let's Talk report as part of this submission.

In mid-2016, YWAG launched a companion report entitled *A Whole Generation Out of Date*⁶, which analyses three focus groups which were run concurrently to the *Let's Talk* survey in collaboration with local youth organisations, in Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. During these focus groups, topics of discussion included young people's experiences and stories of sex education in school.

YWAG recommends that the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education is compulsory in and accessible to all Australian schools. 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. Together these approaches act as a primary prevention strategy.

YWAG recommends that the Australian 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

YWAG recommends a strong emphasis on student-centered, 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. It is vital to incorporate content about young people's use of digital technology in their relationships, including sexting practices:

- is included in sexuality and relationships education

⁶ See YWAG. *A Whole Generation Out of Date: Young People's Stories of Sex Education*. Equality Rights Alliance 2016. Available from <http://reports.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/ywag/lets-talk/>.

- addresses attitudes and norms which create hurtful and abuse behaviours (e.g. 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

Based on our research and consultation with young people, particularly women, YWAG supports the view that the sharing of intimate images is part of a spectrum of normal sexual practices engaged in by both adults and young people⁷. We support a view of the non-consensual sharing of such images as sexual violence and abuse. We note that a recent report from RMIT found that young people and lesbian, gay and bisexual people, are particularly at risk of image-based abuse.⁸ Moreover, we note that like other forms of sexual violence, the non-consensual sharing of images is a gendered practice, as it is primarily perpetrated by men, and because the social costs to women are greater when their images are shared.⁹

YWAG recommends that the Australian Government support quality training, professional development and support for teachers, that is informed by young people, to deliver the curriculum on sex education and respectful relationships. We recommend the implementation of such training be included both within (Commonwealth funded) pre-service education for teachers, and on-the-job support and training. Such education requires accountability from Government to ensure it is accessible across Australia regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic background, cultural background, education sector or religious affiliation, and accessibility will be bolstered by standardised pre-service training.

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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Henry, Nicole, Anastasia Powell, and Asher Flynn. 2017. Not just 'revenge pornography': Australians' experiences of image-based abuse. Victoria: RMIT

⁹ See Henry, Nicola, and Anastasia Powell. 2014. Beyond the 'sext': Technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment against adult women. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 48 (1):104-118; Walker, Shelley, Lena Sanci, and Meredith Temple-Smith. 2013. Sexting: Young Women's and Men's Views on Its Nature and Origins. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 52:697-701 and Powell, Anastasia, and Nicola Henry. 2014. Blurred Lines? Responding to 'Sexting' and Gender-based Violence among Young People. *Children Australia* 39 (2):119-124.; Henry, Nicole, Anastasia Powell, and Asher Flynn. 2017. Not just 'revenge pornography': Australians' experiences of image-based abuse. Victoria: RMIT.

Young women, like all young people, have agency, and can contribute analysis and perspectives from a particular set of life experiences that need to be both respected and included in national conversations and for the development of equitable policy. YWAG emphasises the importance of including young women's voices at the level of federal policy and legislation. We propose holistic principles to comprehensive sexuality and respectful relationships education in Australian schools. Our recommendations are supported by both evidence-based secondary literature, and the views of the young Australian women who participated in our surveys and focus groups.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide consultation to the Commonwealth on the Fourth Action Plan. YWAG would welcome the opportunity to provide further information about the views and information presented in this submission.

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.