

Bio

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YWAG would like to thank the mentors and experts who have provided input into our project, including Joanna Lindner (ACFID), and Alison Coelho (Centre for Culture, Ethnicity & Health). For more information on YWAG, visit: <http://equalityrightsalliance.org.au/projects/young-womens-advisory-group>.

Listening to Young Women: The Equality Rights Alliance Young Women’s Advisory Group (YWAG) Policy Position on Sexuality Education

The feminist movement has been a key voice for Australian public policy reform, from voting rights and equal pay, to access to quality education []. Today, Equality Rights Alliance (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 [ref].

Its Young Women’s Advisory Group (YWAG) is a space for up to ten young women aged 18 to 30 around Australia to inform ERA projects at a national level. Grounded in a feminist agenda, YWAG applies a gender lens to public policy. This process not only assesses if policies disproportionately affect women, but seeks opportunities to address gender inequality in policy and practice.

YWAG members are part of different policy work groups including housing, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and international engagement. It is a firsthand training opportunity for young women not likely to be connected to women’s groups to gain advocacy experience, connections in the women’s movement, and build on shared, intergenerational leadership. Rather than speaking on behalf of young women, YWAG is a space for individuals to draw on their own experiences and skills to address policy issues. We are young women from various professional backgrounds, geographic locations, and cultural backgrounds, all with a common interest in policy and advocacy. By utilising the networks in our local communities, we aim to bring young women’s voices to the table.

The Importance of Young Women’s Voices

“When women are ‘out of sight, out of mind’, meeting their needs does not get prioritised.”

- Helen Clark, Former Prime Minister of New Zealand and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme [ref, Clark]

When it comes to public policy, YWAG strongly advocates for the inclusion of diverse perspectives, including those of young women. We believe it is vital for young women to have a voice in society and influence policy, especially those that directly affect young people. Having young people

engaged in meaningful participation – in their societies, and in democratic practices, is recognised by youth advocates and development worldwide, including the UN [ref, AYAC 2014, UNDESA 2007]. As our name and feminist agenda suggest, we promote the role that young women play to address gender inequalities, from women’s leadership to gender-based violence.

When it comes to educational policy, YWAG believes the inclusion of young women’s voices is critical to making education accessible for those it is intended for. Drawing on the experiences of young women will help [ensure] the education system can meet their needs. The role of education in society embodies particular educational philosophies [ref], and we do not want adults and policymakers alone to decide what is important for the development and life outcomes of young people.

Currently, YWAG is contributing to ERA’s position on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Australia, particularly sexuality education. The release of the Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report opens up space for discussion, providing an opportunity for a range of voices to inform the debate on what ‘good’ sexuality education should look like.

YWAG: Our Model of Voice Building and Advocacy

[YWAG has embarked on a new project to develop our policy position and advocacy strategy on sexuality education in Australia.] Through this project we are both learning about and ‘doing’ advocacy, while providing a platform for young women to contribute to educational policy. Rather than being ‘experts’ in the field of education, our strength is in drawing on the diverse experiences and voices of young women. The following outlines a broad eight-step process for implementing our advocacy project. We are currently up to step five, and will continue to revisit and build on previous stages as our project grows:

YWAG Advocacy and Voice Building Process

1. Identify advocacy need
YWAG chose to focus on sexuality education and respond to the Review of the Australian Curriculum
2. Explore and build evidence base
YWAG investigated current literature on the sexual and reproductive health of young people, in particular young women, current state of sexuality education and its gaps, and recommendations to improve sexuality education
3. Develop advocacy strategy
*YWAG held a face-to-face workshop to address:
What is our vision for sexuality education in Australia?
What do we want to achieve as a group?
What can we do about it?*
4. Develop working statement
YWAG developed a draft Working Statement on Sexuality Education
5. Seek feedback from and connect with experts in the field
YWAG sought feedback from local and interstate experts in education, gender, and

community services e.g. presented at AWE 2014 conference

6. Draw on the diverse experiences of young women
YWAG will build on evidence base by collecting case studies and stories from young women's experiences of sexuality education, online survey etc. nationally
7. Raise awareness
YWAG will raise awareness through blogging, social media, harnessing local young women's networks etc.
8. Engage in direct parliamentary advocacy
YWAG will use our Statement on Sexuality Education and evidence base in our parliamentary advocacy and our response to the Review

Exploring the State of Sexuality Education

As per stage two of our project, YWAG began exploring literature on the state of sexuality education in Australia to provide context for our advocacy work. Although sexuality education is included in the Australian Curriculum, namely in Health and Physical Education (HPE), the implementation of such content is vastly inconsistent and dependant on the interest and capacity of individual schools and teachers [ref – Mitchell et al 2011]. It is the responsibility of individual jurisdictions to determine the content of and extent to which sexuality education is taught [ref – Mitchell et al 2011, see National Sexual Health Strategies summary].

The release of the Review of the Australian Curriculum highlights significant implications for sexuality education, which was identified as the most “controversial area” within HPE []. While there was support for elements of sexuality education content, some submissions were completely opposed to including any sexuality education at all. One jurisdiction in particular stated that it would refuse to implement sexuality education content [Ref Australian Government, p. 204].

Although the Review recommends that sexuality education remain within the curriculum, it also argues that “schools should be given greater flexibility to determine the level at which these areas are introduced and the modalities in which they will be delivered” [ref – Australian Government, p. 207]. There is no doubt that the autonomy of schools and catering for local context is crucial to meeting student needs. Yet this still provides an avenue for some schools and jurisdictions to water down or omit key aspects of sexuality education, particularly the more complex and sensitive topics. [e.g. “submissions by the NCEC signals that Catholic schools reserve the right to implement the Australian curriculum according to the uniquely faith-based and religious nature of such schools” [ref, p. 207]. [Moreover, with the discourse of an “overcrowded curriculum” inherent within the Review, this could be another missed opportunity to improve and strengthen sexuality education.]

Through our initial investigation of the current literature, YWAG identified a number of areas within sexuality education which were either gaps or areas that needed to be strengthened:

Social (and Gendered) Aspects of Sexual Health

Social aspects of sexual health are to a certain extent outlined in the Australian Curriculum, particularly through the general capabilities “personal and social capability”, “ethical behaviour”, and “intercultural understanding” [ref, ACARA]. Students are also encouraged to explore personal and social factors that support and contribute to their identities [ref, ACARA]. Teaching more content, such as communication and negotiation skills, is supported by students, educators, researchers, and policymakers alike [ref, Carmody 2009, Department of Health, Department of Social Services 2014, Mitchell et al 2011, Mitchell et al 2014, Powell]. [The amount of content on social aspects actually taught in the classroom however varies (e.g. recent studies have shown that young people see discussions on consent as a clear gap in their sexuality education) [Mitchell et al 2014, Powell].

There is also little mention within the HPE curriculum of how gender affects the social aspects and experiences of young people’s sexual health. Many researchers and organisations promote the use of gender analysis in sexuality education [Carmody et al, IPPF, Ollis]. IPPF (2010) advocates for gender sensitive comprehensive sexuality education which allows young people to explore gender roles, perceptions of masculinity and femininity, changing societal norms, and consequences of stereotypes and inequalities [ref, p. 7]. This needs to be done in a way that acknowledges the agency of individual young people alongside the influence of broader structures in the construction of sexualities and gender [ref, Ollis 2011].

The use of a gender lens in sexuality education, particularly when dealing with issues such as sexual assault is also a means to raise awareness and change harmful gendered attitudes and norms within relationships (Carmody et al, 2009, p. 24).

Violence Prevention and Respectful Relationships

Prominent researchers in the field of violence prevention have long advocated for addressing sexual violence through prevention education [ref, Carmody et al, Carmody 2009]. Violence (and the absence of) is seen as intimately connected to the concept of sexual health [ref, Ollis], 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) [ref, Department of Health] as well as maintain respectful relationships to prevent gender-based violence [McGaurr, Powell].

In the current Australian Curriculum, the focus area “Relationships and sexuality” aims to develop knowledge, understanding and skills that will help students establish and manage respectful relationships []. Indeed, the Review of the Australian Curriculum revealed extensive support for the inclusion of respectful relationships. This is also backed by the *Second Action Plan 2013-2016*, which explicitly states action to “incorporate respectful relationships education into the national curriculum” [ref p. 16]. Students themselves have expressed the need to include respectful relationships in their schooling [ref, Mitchell et al 2014].

And it is not hard to see why there is a need to engage young people in sexual assault prevention education when, according to the latest *Community Attitudes towards Violence Survey* [ref VicHealth, 2014):

- 16% of respondents believe that women often say no when they mean yes
- 43% of respondents believe that rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex (up from 35% in 2009)
- while young people’s attitudes are gradually improving over time, young people have somewhat more violence-supportive attitudes than others.

[linking sentence]

Professional Learning and Support for Teachers

[An identified need for teachers is thorough training and professional development [Australian Government, Carmody et al, Department of Health, Mitchell et al]. Given the complexity of many topics in sexuality education, the Review found a substantial concern about “the capacity of generalist teachers to cope with the often complex and sensitive content in this area” [Australian Government, p. 206]. This includes the need for professional learning and support to teachers from outside HPE, including regular opportunities to reflect, seek advice and share experiences [Ollis, p. 25]. Pre-service teacher training and resources such as “Sexuality Education Matters” [...].

Content that teachers need support with include [Department of Health, NASASV Standard 3 Carmody et al 2009, Powell]:

- culturally sensitive practice, that which acknowledges students’ different cultural, social and language needs
- same sex attraction (it is worth noting however that some submissions in the Review opposed the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex content [Ref Australian Government, p. 204]
- pleasure of sexuality
- respectful relationships
- sexual assault and violence.

Teachers can also be supported through outsider expertise [ref – Australian Government, p. 206]. Community based prevention organisations, sexual assault services etc. are key partners in the development of a national approach to sexual assault prevention education [ref, Powell, p. 7]. []

[linking sentence]

Working Statement

Having explored evidence of the Australian Curriculum and its implementation on the ground, YWAG has developed a draft, working statement on sexuality education. This is the framework drives our purpose, and informs what we are advocating for.

YWAG’s Working Statement on Sexuality Education

The Equality Rights Alliance’s (ERA) Young Women’s Advisory Group (YWAG) believes that sexuality education in Australia is in need of reform. In order to meet the needs of young people, and equip them with the skills and capacity to maintain their sexual and reproductive health (SRH), well-being, and respectful relationships, YWAG is advocating for a national comprehensive sexuality education curriculum.

YWAG believes that a reformed comprehensive sexuality education curriculum should:

- be underpinned by a **gender lens** and understanding of gendered dynamics
- actively address gender based violence and engage in **violence prevention**
- include a central focus on **respectful relationships**
- explore sexual and reproductive health and respectful relationships within the context of **promoting health and well-being**
- be **culturally conscious** and **inclusive** of diverse sexualities, abilities
- be informed by **young women's** and young people's **voices**.

In implementing comprehensive sexuality education, YWAG believes that the curriculum should:

- be **student-centred**, driven by young people's needs, and empowering to young people
- be delivered in a **safe environment** in which young people can explore sexual and reproductive health, well-being, and respectful relationships, free from stigma and shame
- encourage young people to **reflect on their own behaviour, ethics, and morals/values** in relation to sexuality and relationships
- be **engaging and relevant** to young people, making room for fun
- link in with the **broader community**
- build the **capability and skills** of young people to engage in and negotiate respectful relationships.

Looking Forward

YWAG's Working Statement on Sexuality Education will inform our advocacy work and response to the Review. We will continue to build an evidence base by engaging young women throughout Australia on their experiences of sexuality education. YWAG is currently looking for educators, researchers, policymakers, and young people/women?? who are interested in providing:

- advice on our working statement, mechanisms to reach young women etc.
- support for promoting online survey and engaging young women
- research and evidence base for best practice in comprehensive sexuality education, violence prevention etc.

Central to YWAG's advocacy is the idea that sexuality education is accessible to those who are receiving it. In doing so we aim to inform effective policy which responds to the needs of young people, from the perspectives of young women.

To find out more and/or get involved, contact Hannah Gissane, ERA Project Coordinator (era.projects@ywca.org.au, 02 6230 5152).

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