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Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
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Dear Secretary,

Re: Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts - Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment

Organisation making submission

SHine SA Inc (Sexual Health information networking and education South Australia), formerly the Family Planning Association of SA, is the lead sexual health agency in South Australia providing one to one clinical and counselling services as well as community and workforce education programs, research, clinical practice training, resource development and community participation programs. SHine SA has been increasingly concerned about the issue of sexualisation of children and young people in and by the media and the impact this has on their health, safety and wellbeing. Our submission is based on research and the organisation's experience of working with individuals, the community and other service providers.

Issues

For most Australians sexual health is not a comfortable topic and this is reflected in the silence around sex and sexuality and in the delivery of many health, education and support services [2]. Many politicians and other community leaders prefer that these issues remain invisible and off the public agenda. Many parents lack the skills to critically analyse and understand the longer term impacts of sexualisation of girls in the media and the impact these messages have on the behaviour of boys towards girls and eventually men towards women. Often, issues of sexuality, sexual health including relationships and sexual health education for children and young people are contextualised in a moral rather than a human rights discourse.

TV, Internet, radio, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video-games and advertising increasingly portray sexualised images which promote narrow and unrealistic 'standards' of physical beauty and sexual interest [3]. Females are more often than males portrayed in a sexual manner and objectified (eg used as a decorative object or as body parts). Males are raised in a

society that glorifies sexually aggressive masculinity and considers as the norm the degradation of women[6].

There is a serious imbalance between the profile, importance and resources invested in the selling of sex and that invested in dealing with the problems potentially caused by this promotion. For example, Australia is one of the last developed countries without comprehensive relationships and sexual health education programs delivered to children and young people as a part of the compulsory core school curriculum. This reflects in higher teen pregnancy rates and much earlier initiation of sexual activity than Scandinavia and most of Western Europe.

Impacts of sexualisation

Research has linked sexualisation to unrealistic and unsafe attitudes, expectations and behaviours, feelings of anxiety and shame about sexuality and appearance, eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression [3].

In our experience as a sexual health service provider, we see the impact on boys and girls (men and women) of the portrayal of girls and young women as sex objects without a balancing amount of accurate, realistic information provided by parents, schools and the community.

Over-promotion and exploitation of sexuality in all forms of media works against healthy behaviours, including decision making around personal safety in girls and boys. The media reinforces the concept that “risky people and risky behaviours” are the cause of sexual health issues such as rape, abortion and sexually transmitted infections among teenage girls (and younger) and not lack of appropriate policy. Sexualisation in the media reinforces the message and tolerance of gender inequity and violence between men and women [1]. Images and messages that imply children are ‘seductive’ places judgemental focus on the character of the child not on the people who manipulate and abuse them. A culture that normalises misogynistic attitudes only benefits the perpetrators who target children and as such continues to put women and children at risk [6].

The adverse sexual health experiences and outcomes related to gender/power inequalities that we see on our work at SHine SA include:

- Women, young people and children experiencing a higher rate of sexual coercion, assault and abuse
- Men not accessing sexual health services when needed
- Young women experiencing difficulties in negotiating sex and use of contraception
- Men being victimised and subjected to discrimination if they don't conform to accepted modes of masculinity
- Prevalence of adverse sexual & other health outcomes is higher for people of diverse sexualities
- Few (if any) services for people of diverse sexualities
- Denial of sexuality (regardless of gender) for people with a disability.

Interventions

Parents, other adult family and friends, peers and particularly the school community can reinforce or attempt to counter sexualised societal messages.

Evaluation research has highlighted promising interventions to reduce the negative effects of sexualisation and homophobia, and promote healthy, respectful relationships [3, 4, 5]; these include:

- comprehensive age-appropriate relationships and sexual health education programs in schools beginning in early Primary years and delivered by trusted and trained teachers
- school-based media literacy programs that teach critical/analytical skills in viewing and consuming media
- increased access to physical activity (particularly for girls), peer-education and other empowerment programs
- parent education about the impacts of sexualisation and about relationships and sexual health
- action by parents, community groups and organisations to counter sexualisation, model alternative values and ways of being, and focus on people's abilities and character rather than on their appearance
- alternative media that encourage and support people to build social connections, speak out and develop their own healthy ways of being

The promotion of healthy respect is most effective when the messages are:

- based on research evidence so that they are factual, comprehensive and non-judgemental
- clear and consistent, and constantly reinforced over time
- communicated using a variety of different formats
- targeted to particular groups
- respectful of the target audience and involve them in design and delivery
- reinforced by a range of supporting strategies
- designed to challenge underlying sexism and male dominance.

Conclusions

SHine SA congratulates the Senate for undertaking this important inquiry. SHine SA strongly recommends that the Senate formulate appropriate policy and identify additional resources for the implementation of interventions identified in this submission, with national leadership being provided by the Commonwealth Government.

References

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