

The Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Email: eca.sen@aph.gov.au.

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to you in relation to the inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment. I am writing this as a practicing youth worker and coordinator of a youth organisation, and also as a concerned woman who would like to ensure that all children can grow and develop in an environment that is conducive to this occurring positively. I believe that it is the right of every child to be protected and we as a society have a responsibility to make sure that this occurs.

I would like to present to the inquiry valid reasons and arguments as to why changes need to occur, including:

- the argument for government regulations concerning this issue
- consequences for breaching these regulations,
- the onus of proof to be on the media to show how this does not cause harm,
- an easier process for the community to raise its concerns regarding the sexualisation of children (and women) in the media, and
- an educational component.

As it stands now the self-regulation of the media is failing. Making a complaint is a very complicated process, the system is very convoluted and when you do get to the right body to complain to it seems that the complaints are denied for a variety of reasons that don't seem to make sense. The process is time consuming confusing and seems to have little to no impact on advertising standards. I would ask that policing oneself when the bottom line is profit does not bode well for harsh criticism to occur. An independent body is needed to oversee complaints that is centralised and easy for the public to understand and access. The independent body also needs to have 'teeth:' powers to impose penalties on those breaching the regulations.

It also needs to be that the onus is put on the media to show how their actions do not breach the regulations. So if a community member makes a complaint that is inline with the new regulations they do not need to prove harm but that the media needs to show how harm is not occurring.

I am unsure how much information or research the Inquiry members will undertake, however there is plenty of well documented studies that articulate the dangers and negative consequences to the early and inappropriate sexualisation of children and young people. A great example of this research was the work undertaken by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2007 and in an Australian context, Rush and La Nauze in 2006. This research points out the wide-ranging and damaging effects that sexualising children has. This includes low self-esteem (which in itself creates a range of ongoing issues for children and young people) depression and other serious mental health issues like eating disorders, and the issues continue and develop well into adulthood.

Another key point is that Australia is a signatory to the convention on The Rights of the Child. This human rights policy is considered to be the basis from which we as a

community and as a government work from when developing or reviewing policies. When Australia ratified the Convention they agreed to always put the best interest of the child first and proclaimed their intention to put the commitments into practice. This means that they need to create, and amend laws and policies taking into the considerations put forward in the Convention. The Convention recognises that we owe the best that we can give to children and young people. It recognises that we owe them special care and protection over and above those already recognised as Human Rights. This special care and protection includes 54 articles and two Optional Protocols that Australia has agreed to and I have listed below those articles that are relevant to this debate.

Article 14

2. States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child. *(In this case parents are unable to block messages via media that is everywhere to ensure their children are seeing, hearing and experiencing what is inline with the developmental stage of the child to appropriately digest. Having sexualised images on day time tv, in magazines, on billboards etc makes it impossible for the parent to exercise any control over this).*

Article 17

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media.

e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well being.

(Current research is clear that the sexualisation of children and young people is injurious to their well being)

Article 32

States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

(If actually having sexual contact is inappropriate then how is being sexualised at the same age ok?)

Article 34

States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

(Pretty self explanatory – why are we allowing them to be sexually exploited if as a global community we have already acknowledged and agreed that this is not ok?)

Article 36

States Parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare.

(If the previous articles didn't make it clear enough that sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age is wrong and that we as adults need to protect them from this then here it is again – anything that is prejudicial to a child's welfare the 'States' must protect them against). (<http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2erc.htm>)

Thus it is easy to see that already Australia has made commitments to respect, honour and provide protection to children as we recognise that they require this over and above adults. I am asking that in considering amendments to the AANA Code and/or developing other government regulation that you keep in mind that we have already agreed that we would ensure that we protect children and young people from anything that is hazardous to their health, spiritual, moral and social development. It needs to be openly acknowledged that children and adolescents can be adversely affected by sexualised public advertising that may or may not include children or young people. It is also the inappropriate viewing of sexually explicit material that sexualises children.

Education on the harm that sexualisation of children and young people and the limited portrayals of women's body image needs to occur. This is evident from the research conducted by the APA which found that sexualising and objectifying by the media led to attitudes where sexual violence and harassment of females was ok. This is a worrying thought – with the statistics of sexual and physical violence of women and children in Australia at incredibly unacceptable levels we need to be taking some serious action to turn this around. We need to start taking concerted steps to ensure that the community clearly understands the detriments to the normal development of children and young people and also that doing nothing causes harm not just to the individual but that they may go on to cause harm to others as well.

Surely I am not wrong in believing that we as a community or society do not want to harm children and young people. We want them to have the opportunity to develop into adults that can form healthy relationships. We need to educate people on the harms of the damaging portrayal of the human body (especially for female children and women) and the early sexualisation of children and young people. We should value the time that is available to be a child and we should allow children to mature as is developmentally appropriate.

I hope that this information is useful and I am happy to provide further information if required.

Thank you for your time.

Kind Regards

Leanne Nicholson