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**10 March 2016**

**Committee Secretary**

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Introduction**

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) welcomes the Senate Committee's Inquiry into *Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet* and its commitment to address the impact of pornography in Australia through a consultative approach, examination of evidence and practices.

Women's Health in the South East is the regional women's health service for the Southern Metropolitan Region of Victoria. WHISE works to improve the health and wellbeing of women focusing on two main priority areas: sexual and reproductive health and the prevention of violence against women. Gender equity and capacity building approaches underpin all of our work within these priority areas.

The majority of our health promotion work occurs within the primary prevention space which focuses on addressing the root causes of ill health. To achieve this, WHISE works directly with governments, organisations, education providers, and community groups to remove barriers that prevent women from achieving positive health outcomes within the region. Our work spans across 10 local government areas: Port Phillip, Stonnington, Glen Eira, Bayside, Kingston, Greater Dandenong, Frankston, Casey, Cardinia and Mornington Peninsula.

With over 20 years' experience, WHISE and other Women's Health Services funded under the Victorian Women's Health Program are the leaders of Prevention of Violence against Women (PVAW) and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Primary prevention is our long-term, core business and specific expertise and WHISE operates as a driver to regional efforts in PVAW and SRH.

**Susan Glasgow**



**Chief Executive Officer**

**Women's Health in the South East**

## Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet, with particular reference to:

- a. Trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships;

There has been a rapid shift in Australia's media landscape with the increase of social media and greater accessibility to the Internet on many new devices. This has contributed to online pornography becoming a highly influential medium within contemporary culture (Duschinsky, 2012). These mediums, alongside communication technologies such as advertisement, magazines, films and music videos have increased the portrayal of women in sexualised representations (APA, 2010). Pornography and sexually explicit material objectify women determining a female's value by their sexual appearance and behaviour, contributing to the sexual objectification of females to become a normalised phenomenon. It is known that consumption of online pornography is a gendered practice, with young males primarily seeking pornographic content (Flood, 2007). In a 2006 Australian study of 13 to 16-year-old school students, it was found that 93 per cent of males and 62 per cent of females reported being exposed to online pornography (Fleming et al., 2006). Similarly, it is known that many young individuals are accidentally exposed to pornography whilst online and a further study found that 84 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls reported having been accidentally exposed to sexualised websites (Flood, 2007).

Duschinsky (2012) highlights that pornographic content reflects and reinforces cultural norms and expectations maintained within the sociocultural environment, which directly and indirectly influence individual's perceptions and attitudes. As a result, online consumption and exposure of pornography has detrimental cumulative impacts on children and young individuals and negatively impacts developmental processes. In particular, childhood and adolescence are developmental stages in which the formation and understanding of identity, sexual identity and relational wellbeing is critical, contributing to the importance of positive body image and the capacity to arbitrate decisions and relations. It is a time of conscious awareness of societal norms and a period of vulnerability to social surroundings.

The impacts of exposure to sexually explicit content include:

- **Violence against women**

Current approaches to the sexual objectification of women within pornography underpin themes of female subordination and male dominance, reinforcing overarching societal gender inequality which is the underlying cause of violence against women. Pornographic

content and sexualisation of women reinforces hyper-masculinity and trivialises and eroticises violence against women which reinforces and further contributes to the current attitudes and perceptions that exist towards women. This portrayal of women has contributed to gendered power concerns, female stereotypes and reflects and reinforces societal views on the role of women and the appropriate treatment towards females (Hald, Malamuth & Yuen, 2010). As a result, interpersonal relationships cannot be considered without recognising the broader contextual and societal factors that contribute to the portrayal of women within this medium. Lim, Carrotte & Hellard (2016) found that the consumption of pornography was associated with an increased likelihood of committing sexual aggression, typifying patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity. It was found that 88 per cent of pornography contained high levels of verbal and physical aggression towards women and pornography content support sexually aggressive behaviours and violence supporting attitudes towards girls and women (Harkness, Mullan & Blaszczynski, 2015). This portrayal of women within pornography is contributing to unrealistic sexual expectations by boys and men and conditioning and socialising unhealthy behaviours for intimate partner relationships and attitudes towards females, which is encouraging coercive and forceful behaviours by young men and contributing to sexual violence and rape culture (Flood, 2007). In a recent online survey, it was found that 51% of young Australian girls felt pressured into taking sexual photos of themselves and share them online and 60% receive unwanted sexual photos, messages and videos (Our Watch, 2016). This form of abuse is increasing due to the influence of pornography and is reinforcing the current sociocultural violence against women context.

- **Pornography as a primary sex educator**

Pornography has further become the primary sex educator for young individuals regarding sexual health and sexuality education. Given the lack of current comprehensive and standardised sexual health education within National and Victorian curriculum, pornography poses a public health risk. Young individuals do not recognise that online pornography is a realm of sexual fantasy and not an educational medium and therefore, accessibility encourages unhealthy sexual and relationship education messages. Young men are more likely to view pornography positively than young women, who frequently report that it is unwelcome and distasteful and express concerns about porn's influence on sexual expectations (Horvath et al., 2013). Owens et al (2012) found that pornography provided young individuals with a limited understanding regarding intimacy and social and emotional connectedness which contributes to liberalised sexual attitudes and behaviours. It has become the primary tool for sexual socialisation and self-discovery regarding sexual behaviours and lacks the importance of healthy sexual development.

Significantly, pornography is normalising sex acts that many women do not enjoy and that they may experience as degrading, painful or violating (Crabbe et al., 2013). This raises

serious implications for young people's capacity to develop a sexuality that incorporates mutual pleasure, respect and the negotiation of free and full consent. While the results are complex, research into the effects of pornography consumption provides reliable evidence that exposure to pornography increases aggressive attitudes and behaviours towards women for some viewers (Malamuth, Addison & Koss 2000). Pornography consumption has also been found to be associated with sexual health risk-taking and can have negative impacts on body image and sense of self (Crabbe et al., 2013).

Other concerns from viewing pornography are risky sexual practices such as the lack of protective measures and contraception. Pornographic content exhibits sexual engagement that primarily does not utilise safe sex practices therefore, safe sex practices have diminished as a social norm, posing sexual health risks for those engaged in sexual activity. Young individuals mimic social learning's and behaviours that are exhibited, despite lacking effective sexual health education regarding the sexual health risks associated with unsafe sexual practices (Lim, Carrotte & Hellard, 2016). It is known that sexually transmitted infection (STI's) rates within young individuals are increasing. For example, it is known that 80% of Chlamydia rates occur in young individuals aged less than 29 years, with a high proportion of these individuals aged 15-19 years. Although STI's are preventable diseases, pornography is encouraging a culture of unsafe sexual practices which is contributing to an increase in preventable health concerns.

Nevertheless, limited research and evidence currently exists within the Australian context regarding empirical impacts and effects of pornography on young individuals.

**b. Current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods:**

Harm minimisation is based on the public health model, in which it considers the health, social and economic consequences on both the individual and the community as a whole (Department of Health, 2004). A harm minimisation approach has been used over a number of years for particular priority areas such as illicit drugs, tobacco and alcohol, in environments where existing cultural norms make exposure to and consumption of such drugs likely. Harm minimisation approaches within this context, does not condone drug use, but rather acknowledges that some people will choose to use drugs and therefore, harm minimisation seeks to prevent or reduce drug-related harms (Crabbe, 2014) which have been effective method within the Australian context.

Sexuality education within an International and National context has also often used a harm minimisation theoretical framework and it sought to minimise the risks associated with sexual activity, such as sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy (Ollis et al., 2013). However, unlike drug education, which seeks to discourage young people

from initiating illicit and harmful drug use at any point in their lives, sexuality education does not seek to discourage young people from being sexually active. Rather, sexuality education aims to equip young people with the means to develop healthy sexuality and sexual health practices. A harm minimisation framework in this context involves recognising that young people's exposure to explicit sexual imagery has become a social norm through the use of technology and it is associated with a range of risks, and developing strategies to minimise both the likelihood of exposure and the related harms. A harm minimisation approach takes into account the appeal of explicit sexual imagery and the relationship between people, the explicit sexual imagery they use and the environments in which they use them. Nevertheless, due to growing awareness about the importance of a positive approach to sexuality and sexual health, many educational approaches have moved away from a harm minimisation framework towards a strengths-based approach (Ollis et al., 2013). A strengths-based approach for explicit sexual imagery does not seek to deny the reality of risks and harms, but, rather, acknowledges and affirms that all children and young people, and their communities, have particular strengths and resources that can be nurtured to improve their own and others' health' and wellbeing (Crabbe, 2014). A strengths-based approach to education encourages positive expectations of all young people as learners, and assumes that all young people are able to learn, develop and succeed (Crabbe, 2014). A resource developed by Maree Crabbe *In The Picture* assists schools to use a strengths-based approach to these issues by nurturing students' capacities to identify, analyse and respond to the influence of explicit sexual imagery. By using participatory, learner-centred teaching methods that encourage critical and creative thinking, the program draws on students' insights and equips students to address these issues and the world more broadly (Crabbe, 2014). Utilising a harm minimisation framework in combination with the strengths-based approach is an effective method for addressing explicit sexual imagery.

c. **The identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia;**

A National survey commissioned by *Our Watch*, indicated that one in six 12-24 year olds believes 'women should know their place', and one in three believes 'exerting control over someone is not a form of violence'. Also, more than a quarter of young people believe 'male verbal harassment' and 'pressure for sex toward females' are 'normal' practices. This report reveals parents aren't talking to their children about relationships and sex (Our Watch, 2015). It also shows that beyond basic anatomy and talk of STIs, relationship education is not covered adequately through the education system. Young people desperately want information and guidance from people they look up to, especially, parents and teachers. Instead, they get information from their friends, pornography, media and popular culture role models. These settings can perpetuate gender stereotypes and condone and encourage violence (Our Watch, 2015). As a result, primary prevention and whole of government and community approach is required to minimise the harms associated with the impacts of pornography on young

individuals. Primary prevention strategies focus on challenging the current structural and socio-cultural context regarding sexualisation and objectification of women which is underpinned by the underlying gender imbalance that exists within society. Primary prevention approaches that focus on attitudes and perceptions regarding women and advocate the importance of gender equality are fundamental for long-term societal change and cannot occur without political advocacy and public engagement.

There is an obvious need for primary prevention strategies that will help young people to develop healthy, safe, equal and respectful relationships, and they need this guidance from positive influences such as parents, teachers, caregivers and coaches (Our Watch, 2015). Engaging children and young people in respectful relationships education is an intervention area that has been successful internationally. It has reduced violence-supportive attitudes and ones that adhere to static gender stereotypes (Our Watch, 2015) to challenge these attitudes and behaviours towards women. Therefore, compulsory standardised sexuality and healthy relationships education needs to be embedded into the National curriculum through a consistent and comprehensive approach.

**Recommendations:**

- A whole of government and community approach that focuses on primary prevention strategies such as awareness raising campaigns and educational strategies;
- Integration and multisectoral collaboration to strengthen community capacity to address the negative effects and impacts of pornography and sexualisation of girls and women;
- Compulsory standardised sexuality and healthy relationships education embedded into the national curriculum;
- Supporting the education sector to identify areas of concern and build the capacity of professionals and teachers to manage;
- Development of strategies that will increase media and information communication technology (ICT) literacy of young individuals;
- Funding and research opportunities to explore accessibility trends, impacts of exposure on young individuals within the Australian context to increase the knowledge and evidence-base that currently exists and to inform best-practice approaches

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