



**Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on
Environment, Communications and the Arts**

**Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the
Contemporary Media Environment**

April 2008

Background

Women's Forum Australia (WFA) is an independent women's think tank that conducts research, education and public policy advocacy on issues which affect the wellbeing and freedom of women in Australia. WFA welcomes the Senate Committee's *Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment*, and makes the following submission.

While WFA is concerned about a diversity of issues relating to women, the issue of the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls in the media and popular culture has been a key one for our organisation.

WFA has played a significant role in exposing the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls. We have written extensively about the marketing of sexually suggestive toys and games, music, clothing and magazines to children as well as the broader message girls receive from popular culture in general which contribute to body image dissatisfaction, disordered eating, depression, anxiety, self-harm and low self-esteem.¹ In our calls for more to be done to address what we believe is a toxic culture, especially for girls, we have found the support of thousands of people across the country, along with a growing number of organisations concerned about the wellbeing of children.

In August 2007, WFA published a major research paper on the subject - *Faking it: the female image in young women's magazines*.² *Faking it* reflected the body of academic research on magazines, mass media, and the sexual objectification of women. It included a chapter specifically on sexualisation of girls, titled 'Girls: too sexy too soon'.³

The magazine-style research paper compiled significant international and Australian research on the damage caused to young women by continually presenting them with objectified, idealised, and sexualised images and storylines.

Disturbingly, our research found that even very young girls are the target of sexually aggressive marketing and the commercialisation of their lives, promoting the view that they are not children, but sexy little adults.

Faking it cited important research on the impact of sexualisation of children by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Australia Institute (AI).

¹ See www.womensforumaustralia.org

² Selena Ewing and Melinda Tankard Reist, ed., *Faking it: the female image in young women's magazines* (Canberra: Women's Forum Australia, 2007).

³ Melinda Tankard Reist, 'Girls: too sexy too soon', in *Faking it: the female image in young women's magazines*, Selena Ewing and Melinda Tankard Reist, ed. (Canberra: Women's Forum Australia, 2007), 30-33. Copy of *Faking it* along with collated articles on the issue, provided to the Committee.

The sources of the premature sexualisation of children

Sexualised culture

The *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls*,⁴ found that objectification is reinforced every day through the embedding of sexual content.

‘A culture can be infused with sexualised representations of girls and women, suggesting that such sexualisation is good and normal’⁵, the report states.

The Australia Institute can be credited for essentially launching the debate on the premature sexualising of children in Australia in its two reports *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia*⁶ and *Letting Children Be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*.⁷ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze state:

In the past, the sexualisation of children occurred indirectly, primarily through exposure of children to representations of teen and adult sexuality in advertising and popular culture. The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in ways modelled on sexy adults, is a new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture.⁸

The authors provided extensive examples of the many ways children are sexualised both directly and indirectly, focussing on advertising, girls’ magazines and television programs, including music video clips.

Many specific itemised examples of sexualised messaging in games, products, clothing, music, magazines, advertisements and billboards have been documented in the past year, especially by Women’s Forum Australia and Kids Free 2B Kids and are easily accessible through respective websites so will not be replicated here.⁹ We will focus on a few key sources of sexualisation.

⁴ American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007).

⁵ *ibid.* 3.

⁶ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006).

⁷ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006).

⁸ *ibid.* vii.

⁹ See www.womensforumaustralia.org and www.kf2bk.com .

Advertising

The Australia Institute found that children were sexualised for two different purposes in advertising - to sell products to children and to sell products to adults.

‘Child-selling-to-child’ advertisements (CC ads) sexualise children to sell products primarily aimed at children, and thus implicitly legitimate precocious sexual behaviour in children. ‘Child-selling-to-adult’ advertisements (CA ads) sexualise children to sell products primarily aimed at adults, and the implicitly paedophilic connotations of this are even more disturbing.¹⁰

In using sex to market their products, advertisers promote sexualisation as attractive and desirable.

Television advertising frequently depicts women more than men in a state of undress, displaying more ‘sexiness’ and as sexual objects.¹¹ Magazine advertisements also frequently depict women in sexualised, decorate ways. Research shows sexual objectification happens more frequently for women in magazine ads than for men.¹² As we found in *Faking it*:

Women are frequently portrayed as sexual objects. There is a dominance of sexualised images of women in advertising, women wearing a lot less than men, and images of women mentally removed from their situations...Women have never-ending sexual appetites - to be satisfied they must be continually available to men for sex...Buying and using the advertised products will make women sexy and beautiful, and thus happy and successful.¹³

The approach to advertising taken by regulatory bodies such as the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) does not appear to recognise that it is not one advertisement alone that affects children, but the ‘cumulative exposure to hundreds or thousands of highly sexualised advertisements, with each advertisement often viewed multiple times, that affects children’s development.’¹⁴

WFA has received a significant number of complaints about billboard advertising (complaints mostly dismissed by the Advertising Standards Board).

¹⁰ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 11.

¹¹ American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 11.

¹² *ibid.* 11.

¹³ Melinda Tankard Reist, ‘Girls: too sexy too soon’, in *Faking it: the female image in young women’s magazines*, Selena Ewing and Melinda Tankard Reist, ed. (Canberra: Women’s Forum Australia, 2007), 4.

¹⁴ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 19.

Market researcher Dr Stephen Downes critiqued the ASB's response to numerous complaints about ads promoting sex 'enhancement' products, documenting responses from many parents about premature ejaculation ads and posters. Many complain that they can't 'turn the billboards' off and they are denied a choice in the timing of sexual discussion with their children.¹⁵

While not overtly targeting children directly, it needs to be recognised that advertising featuring adult sexualised messages in public spaces can have an indirect sexualising effect on children. As the Australia Institute observes: 'Most outdoor and television advertising sexualises adults, but children pick up the message that being sexy is the way to be successful and feel good about oneself.'¹⁶

In *Sex in Public: Women, Outdoor Advertising and Public Policy*,¹⁷ Dr Lauren Rosewarne argues that despite decades of feminist awareness and activism, women continue to be portrayed in outdoor advertising in a limited and sexist manner. Women's Forum Australia agrees with Dr Rosewarne that the public display of women in outdoor advertising is a form of sexual harassment.

The fact that in public space audiences are exposed to such images without choice, renders the issue an important public policy concern. This book examines why such portrayals are concerning for feminists as well as for public policy, and explores the advertising self-regulation systems that facilitate the display of such images. This book criticises sexist outdoor advertising as a form of sexual harassment given that imagery often bearing very strong semblance to pin-ups which would be outlawed in a workplace are readily displayed in public space, reflecting a troublesome public policy double standard.

Girls' magazines

The Australia Institute's research on girls' magazines was particularly disturbing. The authors pointed out that in magazines aimed at very young girls, children are dressed and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that the children do not yet possess.

Girls 'are ...being invited to see themselves not as healthy, active and imaginative girls, but as hot and sassy tweens on the prowl.'¹⁸

Magazines for girls as young as five copy the teen and adult versions. The three most popular are *Barbie Magazine* (for 5 to 12 years), *Total Girl* (8 to 11 years), and *Disney Girl* (6 to 13 years).¹⁹ Thirty-four per cent of girls aged six

¹⁵ Stephen Downes, 'So who gives a FCUK about advertising standards?', *Crickey* 20 February 2008, available at www.crikey.com.au/Media-Arts-and-Sports/20080214-So-who-gives-a-FCUK-about-advertising-standards.html

¹⁶ *ibid.* v.

¹⁷ Lauren Rosewarne, *Sex in public: women, outdoor advertising and public policy*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), back cover.

¹⁸ *ibid.* 23.

¹⁹ *ibid.* viii.

to twelve read one or more of these magazines. Most readers are aged ten and eleven.²⁰

Rush and La Nauze rightly express concern:

The extension of this genre of magazine to younger ages reflects both the increasing commercialisation of children's lives, education and entertainment...and their earlier socialisation into the popularised teenage world of fashion, sex and pop stars.²¹

Rush and La Nauze carried out a content analysis of a sample edition of *Barbie Magazine*, *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl*. It showed that about 50 per cent of the content of the last two was sexualising material. For *Barbie Magazine*, it was 74 per cent.²²

The authors highlight the disturbing reality that girls are encouraged to 'view men and boys as sexual objects, potential partners or crushes.'²³ One *Barbie Magazine* issue was touted as a 'cute crush issue'.²⁴

It contained full page and smaller images of teenage boys and men up to thirty years of age. Images of these men and boys were framed with remarks such as 'who's your celeb dream date?', 'sweet boys', 'our top 5 crushes'.²⁵

This can lead to girls being prepped for sexual advances from men.

There is a risk that if five to twelve year old girls are actively encouraged to have crushes on, and dream about dating, adult men, they will be more inclined to see adult sexual advances as flattering.²⁶

Music and video clips

Concerns have been growing about the increase in sexually violent music, including video clips, which can also contribute to the sexualisation of children.²⁷ The American Psychological Association noted:

²⁰ *ibid.* viii.

²¹ *ibid.* 14.

²² *ibid.* 16.

²³ *ibid.* 21.

²⁴ *Barbie Magazine* (March 2006), 1, cited in Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 21.

²⁵ *Barbie Magazine* (March 2006), 4,33,34, cited in Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 21.

²⁶ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 21.

²⁷ See American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 6-7. Also, D. Miller, 'Claim back the music!', *Online Opinion*, www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=7206 April 8, 2008.

In music videos women are presented in provocative and revealing clothing, are objectified and typically serve as decorative objects that dance and pose and do not play any instruments. They are often displayed in ways that emphasize their bodies, body parts, facial features, and sexual readiness.²⁸

An analysis of *Black Entertainment Television* 'found sexual imagery in 84% of the videos; the two most frequently occurring sexual behaviours were sexual objectification and women dancing sexually.'²⁹

The Australia Institute also examined music videos, stating:

It appears that even quite concentrated and explicit sexually suggestive behaviour and appearances, such as that found in some music videos, falls outside the television regulatory codes as they are currently formulated.³⁰

Exposure to highly sexualised material such as that contained in some music videos, combined with the messages saturating all kinds of advertising that sexiness is highly desirable, leads children to mimic this sexy behaviour...³¹

Pornography

The sexualisation of children - and its ultimate outworking in the sexual abuse of children - has recently received special focus in indigenous communities. Distressing accounts of sexual crimes against children and the role of pornography in these crimes, were detailed in Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children are Sacred": Report of the Northern Territory board of inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse.³²

The report tells of rampant sexually aggressive behaviour, of children being exposed to pornographic films and re-enacting what they have seen and of pornography being used by adults to groom children for sex. The report's authors state:

It was ... confirmed ... that pornography was a major factor in communities and that it should be stopped. The daily diet of sexually explicit material has had a major impact, presenting young and adolescent Aboriginals with a view of mainstream sexual practice and behaviour which is jaundiced. It encourages them to act out the fantasies they see on screen or in magazines.

²⁸ *ibid.* 6.

²⁹ L.M Ward and R. Rivadeneyra, 'Contributions of entertainment television to adolescent's sexual attitudes and expectations: The role of viewing amount versus viewer involvement', *Journal of Sex Research* 36 (1999): 237-249, cited in American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 6.

³⁰ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 26.

³¹ *ibid.* 28.

³² Northern Territory Government Board of inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. *Ampe akelyernemane meke mekarle "Little children are sacred": Report of the Northern Territory board of inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse* (Darwin, NT: 2007). See also Melinda Tankard Reist, 'An invasion of pornography', *Online Opinion*, 23 July 2007, www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=6114

Exposure to pornography was also blamed for the sexualised behaviour evident in quite young children.³³

The report continues:

It is apparent that children in Aboriginal communities are widely exposed to inappropriate sexual activity such as pornography, adult films and adults having sex within the child's view.³⁴

This exposure can produce a number of effects, particularly resulting in the "sexualisation" of childhood and the creation of normalcy around sexual activity that may be used to engage children in sexual activity. It may also result in sexual "acting out", and actual offending, by children and young people against others.³⁵

The Inquiry was told that sexually aberrant behaviour involving both boys and girls was becoming more common among even younger children. In all communities, both men and women were concerned that teenagers were becoming more violent, more sexual and more anarchic.³⁶

Exposure to pornography could be linked to a 'belief in rape myths, the increased acceptance of the use of physical force in sexual relations and a lessening of compassion for child victims', the report stated.³⁷

In 1999, The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report highlighted the link between pornographic films and sexual crimes against women and children. Its authors found:

The incidence of sexual violence is rising and is [in] a direct relationship to negative and deformed male socialisation associated with...the prevalence of pornographic videos in some Communities.³⁸

Of course, non-indigenous children are exposed to pornography also. The Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in November 2003 was told by staff from the Child at Risk Assessment Unit, Canberra Hospital, that exposure to X-rated pornography was a significant factor in children younger than 10-years-old sexually abusing other children. In the first six months of 2003, 48 children under ten were identified as having engaged in sexually abusive acts. Access to graphic sexual images online had shaped the trend.³⁹

³³ Northern Territory Government Board of inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. *Ampe akelyernemane meke mekarle "Little children are sacred": Report of the Northern Territory board of inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse* (Darwin, NT: 2007), 199.

³⁴ *ibid.* 65.

³⁵ *ibid.* 65.

³⁶ *ibid.* 65-66.

³⁷ *ibid.* 209.

³⁸ Queensland Government (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development). *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's task force on violence report*. Rev. edn. (Brisbane, QLD: The State of Queensland, 2000), 156.

³⁹ J. Stanley, C. Tinning and K. Kovacs, *Ninth Australasian conference on child abuse and neglect*, 2003.

Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton wrote a significant research paper in 2003 examining the impacts of pornography exposure on teenage boys which also warrants examination by the committee.⁴⁰

They cited the following:

A study of 275 Canadian teenagers with an average age of 14 found that nine out of ten boys (90 per cent) had 'watched pornography' and one-third of boys did so at least once a month. There was a significant correlation between boys' frequent consumption of pornography and their agreement with the idea that it is acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have intercourse.⁴¹

Regular consumption of pornography, and particularly violent pornography, therefore is a risk factor in boys' and young men's perpetration of sexual assault. More generally, such consumption is likely to intensify attitudes among young men that support rape and erode both males' and females' empathy for women who are the victims of sexual violence. Male peer support — attachment to male peers who encourage and legitimate woman abuse — is a significant predictor of sexual, physical and psychological abuse by men in dating relationships.⁴² Hence, pornography consumption among boys and young men may feed indirectly into perpetration of abuse in some instances and the condoning of abusive behaviour in others. This is particularly important given that young women are three to four times more likely to be subject to sexual and physical violence than older women,⁴³ and young men aged 15 to 25 are responsible for more sexual assaults than older males.⁴⁴

and concluded:

The consumption of pornography influences the prevalence of sexual and physical violence in young people's sexual and social relationships and is one factor sustaining their adherence to sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, *Youth and pornography in Australia: evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*. Discussion paper, 52. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2003). Also available online at: www.tai.org.au/documents/dp_fulltext/DP52.pdf

⁴¹ J. Check, 'Teenage training: the effects of pornography on adolescent males' in *The price we pay: the case against racist speech, hate propaganda and pornography*, ed. Laura J. Lederer and Richard Delgado (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 91, cited in Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, *Youth and pornography in Australia: evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*. Discussion paper, 52. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2003), ix.

⁴² L.L. Heise, 'Violence against women: an integrated, ecological framework', *Violence Against Women* 4 (1998): 276-277, cited in *ibid.* ix.

⁴³ M. Young, J. Byles, and A. Dobson, 'The effectiveness of legal protection in the prevention of domestic violence in the lives of young Australian women', *Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice* 148 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2000): 1. cited in *ibid.* ix, see also, Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Women's safety Australia* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996), 5, cited in *ibid.* ix.

⁴⁴ Australian Institute of Criminology. 'Sexual assault, male offenders by age, rate per 100,000 persons, 1995-1996 and 2000-2001', *Australian crime: facts and figures 2002* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2002), cited in *ibid.* ix.

⁴⁵ Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, *Youth and pornography in Australia: evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*. Discussion paper, 52. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2003), ix.

Short and long term effects of sexualisation of children

Risks of self-sexualisation

The APA report says girls are being imbued with adult sexuality, described by some authorities as 'costuming for seduction'.⁴⁶

...in the current environment, teen girls are encouraged to look sexy, yet they know little about what it means to be sexual, to have sexual desires, and to make rational and responsible decisions about pleasure and risk within intimate relationships that acknowledge their own desires. Younger girls imbued with adult sexuality may seem sexually appealing, and this may suggest their sexual availability and status as appropriate sexual objects.⁴⁷

If girls learn that sexualised behaviour and appearance are approved of and rewarded by society and by the people (e.g., peers) whose opinions matter most to them, they are likely to internalize these standards, thus engaging in self sexualisation.⁴⁸

One of the dominant themes about sexuality reported across these studies and across magazines is that presenting oneself as sexually desirable and thereby gaining the attention of men is and should be the focal goal for women. Girls and young women are repeatedly encouraged to look and dress in specific ways to look sexy for men...and to use certain products in order to be more attractive to and desired by males.⁴⁹

Similarly, the Australia Institute provides a significant discussion on the dangers of portraying children as '...sexual agents who accept or even desire sexual interaction' which can suggest 'that children are capable of meaningfully consenting to such interaction in the way that adults do'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ M. Duffy and J. M. Gotcher, 'Crucial advice on how to get the guy: the rhetorical vision of power and seduction in tween magazine *YM*', *Journal of communication inquiry* 20 (1996): 32-48, cited in American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 8.

⁴⁷ D.L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of desire: teenage girls talk about sexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), cited in American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 3.

⁴⁸ American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 3.

⁴⁹ M. Duffy and J. M. Gotcher, 'Crucial advice on how to get the guy: the rhetorical vision of power and seduction in tween magazine *YM*', *Journal of communication inquiry* 20 (1996): 32-48, cited in American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 8.

⁵⁰ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 38. See also, Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 10-11.

Advertisers and marketers frame children as willing participants in their sexualisation when in fact they are not able to consent meaningfully either to sexualisation or to the sexual interaction it points towards. This framing of children as consenting effectively distracts viewers from children's right to bodily integrity.⁵¹

The American Psychological Association shares these concerns. In an ominous and valid caution, it warns: 'Images of precocious sexuality in girls may serve to normalise abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution, and the sexual trafficking of children.'⁵²

Low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction

Sexualisation of girls can cause them to hate themselves.

In addition to leading to feelings of shame and anxiety, sexualizing treatment and self-objectification can generate feelings of disgust toward one's physical self. Girls may feel they are 'ugly' and 'gross' or untouchable.⁵³

...strong empirical evidence indicates that exposure to ideals of sexual attractiveness in the media is associated with greater body dissatisfaction among girls and young women.⁵⁴

Disordered eating

Exposure to ideals of sexual attractiveness contributes to body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders. The APA found sexualisation is linked with three of the most common mental health problems in girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression or depressed mood.⁵⁵

Young women who viewed fashion magazines versus news magazines preferred to weigh less, were less satisfied with their bodies, were more frustrated about their weight, were more preoccupied with the desire to be thin, and were more afraid of getting fat than were their peers who viewed news magazines.⁵⁶

Frequent exposure to cultural beauty ideals via the media has been shown to be associated with higher rates of eating disorders, both for individuals and for the population at large.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 39.

⁵² American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 34.

⁵³ *ibid.* 23.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* 23.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 24.

⁵⁶ *ibid.* 23.

⁵⁷ *ibid.* 25.

Eating disorders are on the rise in Australia and affecting those of younger ages. A recent article in *The Age* stated:

Not only is the age of anorexic children getting younger. State Government figures also show that there has been a sharp increase in the number of children being admitted or readmitted to the Royal Children's Hospital.⁵⁸

About one in 100 adolescent girls develops anorexia nervosa, the third most common chronic illness for adolescent girls in Australia and the most fatal of all psychiatric illnesses. About one in five students are bulimic.⁵⁹

A study published late last year found one in five girls aged 12 and 13 regularly used fasting and vomiting to lose weight. Fasting was the most widely practiced diet technique for girls aged 12 to 19 followed by vomiting.⁶⁰

Diminishing cognitive performance

The emphasis on sexual appeal can negatively affect girls' cognitive abilities and performance. At a time when young women should be able to reach the highest levels of achievement, they are being constricted and limited by the energy sapping messages about how they should look and act in the world.

To quote the APA again, 'chronic attention to physical appearance leaves fewer resources available for other mental and physical activities.'⁶¹

Self-objectification has been shown to diminish cognitive ability and to cause shame. This cognitive diminishment, as well as the belief that physical appearance rather than academic or extra-curricular achievement is the best path to power and acceptance may influence girls' achievement levels and opportunities later in life.⁶²

Violence and sexual exploitation

WFA wants to especially stress to the Committee, that sexualisation puts girls in danger, contributing to violence against them. Notes the APA:

⁵⁸ Sushi Das, 'Anorexia'. *The Age* 29, March 2008, Insight, 1-2.

⁵⁹ Melinda Tankard Reist, 'Girls: too sexy too soon', in *Faking it: the female image in young women's magazines*, Selena Ewing and Melinda Tankard Reist, ed. (Canberra: Women's Forum Australia, 2007), 39.

⁶⁰ Tamara McLean, 'One in five 12-year-old girls fast, vomit to shed kilos' *AAP*, November 6, 2007.

⁶¹ American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 21.

⁶² *ibid.* 34.

The sexualisation of girls may not only reflect sexist attitudes, a societal tolerance of sexual violence, and the exploitation of girls and women but may also contribute to these phenomena.⁶³

... the message from advertisers and the mass media to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects.⁶⁴

These messages reinforce negative attitudes about women and increase the problems that most affect women.

Pressing social problems that disproportionately affect girls both directly and indirectly, including violence against girls and women, sexual exploitation of girls, forms of pornography, and prostitution of girls, may be maintained or even increased if there is a continued escalating sexualization of girls.⁶⁵

The APA says 'sexualization practices may function to keep girls "in their place" as objects of sexual attraction and beauty, significantly limiting their free thinking and movement in the world.'⁶⁶

If girls and women are seen exclusively as sexual beings rather than as complicated people with many interests, talents, and identities, boys and men may have difficulty relating to them on any level other than the sexual. This could dramatically limit the opportunities boys and men have to interact intellectually with girls and women, to compete with and against them in sports or games, to create art or make music with them, to work together for higher causes (e.g., volunteer work or activism), or to enjoy their company as friends.⁶⁷

The authors convincingly establish the harms caused to children by sexualisation.

Children's development of healthy body image and self-esteem is compromised by pressure to look like miniature adults...Children's general sexual and emotional development is affected by exposure to advertising and marketing that is saturated with sexualised images and themes...to the degree that children focus on sexualising themselves rather than pursuing other more age-appropriate developmental activities, all aspects of their development may be affected. Sexual representations of adults in advertising and marketing often occur together with the treatment of women as objects,

⁶³ *ibid.* 3.

⁶⁴ D. E. Merskin, 'Reviving Lotlita? A media literacy examination of sexual portrayals of girls in fashion advertising'. *American Behavioral Scientist* 48 (2004): 119-129, cited in American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 13.

⁶⁵ American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 31.

⁶⁶ *ibid.* 22.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* 29.

the understanding of sex as either a commodity or an instrument, and the linkage of sex with violence.⁶⁸

Attitudes towards relationships

The bombardment of images of sexualised adult behaviour and themes distorts a child's ability to develop healthy relationships.

The routine exposure of young children to images of adult sexual behaviour devoid of emotions, attachments or consequences works against them developing 'the foundation they need to become adults who are capable of forming positive, caring sexual relationships That children themselves are now being sexualised in advertising and marketing material in ways that emphasise male domination seems likely only to increase the risk that the ethical values that foster healthy relationships will be undermined, in particular for boys.⁶⁹

School-based sexuality and reproductive health education

The Inquiry seeks an understanding of the effectiveness of school-based sexuality and reproductive health education in addressing sexualisation of children. Women's Forum Australia considers that a review of school-based programs should be undertaken to establish how many programs directly address the issue and give students the skills necessary to understand and contend with sexualisation in the media and popular culture. The review should include an examination of whether age and developmentally inappropriate materials may be contributing to the problem.

There is significant pressure on young women especially to engage in sexual activity, often before they are ready. Studies have found many young women have had unwanted sex due to pressure from a sexual partner. *The Australian Study of Health and Relationships* found in 2001-2002, more than 10 per cent of Australian women had been sexually coerced before the age of 17.⁷⁰

The authors of *Corporate Paedophilia* observe:

This is of particular concern where unwanted sex is experienced as sexual coercion (being forced or frightened into unwanted sexual activity), because

⁶⁸ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 2.

⁶⁹ D. Levin, 'So sexy, so soon: the sexualisation of childhood', in *Childhood lost: how American culture is failing our kids*, ed. S. Olfman (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 2-5, cited in Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 46.

⁷⁰ 'Sex in Australia: the Australian study of health and relationships', *Australian and New Zealand journal of public health* 27 (2003), cited in Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 43.

there are 'clear and strong associations between experience of sexual coercion and poorer psychological, physical and sexual health'⁷¹...the younger a girl is at first sexual intercourse, the greater the chance that she has had involuntary or forced sex...⁷²

Because of this, there should be more emphasis on equipping young people with the skills they need to resist pressure to be prematurely sexually involved, especially in a cultural climate in which exposure to highly sexualised media adds additional pressure to be sexually active at younger ages.

In addition, WFA believes there should be positive body image programs in schools which provide the necessary media literacy skills children need to resist negative messages which serve to sexualise them and not treat them as whole people.

Recommendations

With sexualised imagery on the increase, self-regulation is failing our children, and the regulatory system and bodies need serious review. As the Australia Institute stated: 'Children are only likely to be able to develop freely if government assists parents by limiting sexualising material at its source - advertisers and marketers. Current regulation mechanisms are failing in this task.'⁷³

Because of the by now well documented dangers to girls and women of objectifying and sexualisation practices, WFA is calling for the following public policy responses.

1. Amendments to relevant codes

The AANA Code of advertising to children was recently updated to address sexualisation of children in advertising. If the industry is really serious about behaving more responsibly then we should see quite substantial changes very soon.

⁷¹ R. O. de Visser et al, 'Experiences of sexual coercion among a representative sample of adults', *Australian and New Zealand journal of public health* 27 (2003): 198-203, cited in Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 43.

⁷² *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 90. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 42-43.

⁷³ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), v.

However the code dealing with general advertising has no acknowledgment that children and adolescents may be adversely affected by highly sexualised public advertising such as that appearing on billboards.

One significant problem is that the AANA Code accepts community standards as being those determined by the Advertising Standards Board. The inadequacy of this self-serving approach is discussed below.

It is necessary for the AANA to address:

- Sexually provocative or highly sexualised images of adults or adolescents in any context where such depictions may impact adversely on the psychological development of children and adolescents.
- Depictions that sexually objectify men or women, in locations or in ways that could adversely impact the healthy development of children and adolescents.
- Depictions of children as focused on bodily appearance or dress, or as sexually aware or engaging in sexual behaviours.

The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice also has no provisions which acknowledge or deal with content that can act in a sexualising way on children. The Code needs to be updated to prevent programs that depict women in objectified ways, contributing to sexualisation. Other codes dealing with radio and music also need to be reviewed to more effectively monitor and limit recordings and lyrics which sexually objectify women.

2. More Government involvement in regulation

The current self regulatory scheme has failed to maintain adequate advertising standards. It has also failed to acknowledge or respond adequately to the developmental needs of young people. Self regulatory structures and responses have not properly acknowledged the rights of parents and guardians to manage or limit children's exposure to harmful media and advertising messages and images.

The Advertising Standards Board was set up by industry to police itself. It purports to reflect community standards yet does not define them. The Australia Institute observed that a key phrase used for complaints is 'in the context of prevailing community standards, the majority of people would not find this advertisement offensive'.⁷⁴

However, since 'community standards' are nowhere defined, it is not clear how advertisements are judged against them - and in any case, 'the majority of people' may not be the appropriate group to consider when concerns about an advertisement include its impact on children. The exceptionally small proportion of complaints upheld in the 'sex, sexuality and nudity' category

⁷⁴ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 19.

raises questions both about the processes used by the Board and about the capacity of the Board members to judge what 'prevailing community standards' are in the absence of any procedural guidance.⁷⁵

Extensive consumer research commissioned by the Board and released late in 2007 found that 'when compared to the Board, the community is more conservative in their attitude towards sex, sexuality and nudity.'⁷⁶

The ASB does not consult child development experts about the potential impact of advertisements on children before they are released for public viewing. It does not vet advertisements before they are released publicly - it only gets involved when there is a complaint. Even when complaints are made they are often dismissed, without a response based on objective opinion from health professionals in the field of child development. The ASB cannot impose fines, so advertisers can breach the rules with short advertising campaigns, stop them if the ASB finds against them, and face no penalty.

- Government intervention is needed to ensure that industry practices that are harmful to child and adolescent development are prohibited. A new model is needed which upholds social responsibility to children and the community as being the central consideration in the use of public space and airwaves. Input and participation of relevant industry groups must be balanced by input and participation by the public, especially parents and guardians and child and adolescent development experts as well as government. Public accountability and social responsibility need to be guiding principals in advertising, media and marketing standards and regulation. Political will is needed because any watering down of self-regulation is likely to be resisted by industry. As the Australia Institute observed: '...advertisers...have an interest in avoiding government scrutiny that may lead to stronger regulation of advertising in the interests of the general public...Self-regulation is a strategy that enables the industry to avoid such scrutiny.'⁷⁷ It is time for Government to consider a mandatory code of conduct, possibly through the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) or the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).
- Child and adolescent development experts should be represented on the Advertising Standards Board.

⁷⁵ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 19.

⁷⁶ Advertising Standards Bureau, 'Advertising standards bureau releases world first research', ASB media release, 4 December 2007.

⁷⁷ Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Discussion paper, 93. (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2006), 14.

- Establishment of an independent review body to allow complainants the opportunity to appeal against Board decisions. It must be separate to the ASB to ensure it is not compromised.⁷⁸

3. Oversight of children's interests in marketing, media and advertising

WFA supports the Australia Institute call for an all-encompassing office of media regulation which would include a division with the primary responsibility of protecting children's interests. Staff could include experts who understand the potential harms caused by the premature sexualisation of children, e.g. child psychology, paediatrics, primary teaching, and criminology.

With oversight of all media modes, the children's division would be well aware of the wide range of sexualising material to which children are exposed on a daily basis. The case-by-case approach currently used by media regulators is inadequate. Children rarely suffer harm as a result of exposure to a single case of sexualising material. Rather, harm is caused by cumulative exposure to sexualising material from a range of sources.⁷⁹

WFA also supports the establishment of a Federal Children's Commissioner with the power to

- ban sexualised marketing practices and products that do not respect children's developmental needs.
- educate industry and the public about the dangers of sexualising marketing practices on children and adolescents.

4. Addressing pornography

- The Government's plans to implement a national mandatory filtering scheme requiring all ISPs to prevent pornography transmission in places where children have access must be implemented as a matter of urgency.
- The Government is urged to maintain the ban on X18plus films as part of the Northern Territory intervention.
- Tighter restrictions on the display of magazines with sexualised front covers, including soft-porn magazines, in places frequented by children (frequently at children's eye level) for example petrol stations, convenience stores and supermarkets.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* vi.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* vi.

5. Regulating outdoor advertising

WFA recommends implementation of all the recommendations of The *portrayal of women in outdoor advertising report*.⁸⁰

- Developing guidelines for advertisers in consultation with the community that consider the issues such as the portrayal of women and the possible harmful effects of advertising images on the community, especially children;
- Creating guidelines that comply with decency, honesty, integrity and reality;
- Developing guidelines for advertising materials in any public space;
- Ensuring that all outdoor advertising is suitable for general exhibition;
- The development of a detailed Code of Ethics, such as those of Advertising Standards Canada, with detailed guidelines on the portrayal of women with relation to unnecessary sexualisation, gender role stereotypes, objectification, diversity of race, diversity of sexuality and violence. The adoption of this Code by any regulatory body, whether industry or Government administered;
- Establishing a Code of Practice for advertising generally, and in this case particularly for outdoor advertising, that will establish guidelines for the portrayal of women;
- A process to ensure an advertiser is publicly accountable for following the Code (of Ethics);
- The adoption of protocols/procedures to enforce Advertiser Code of Ethics; and
- A forum for media owners and advertisers, the AANA AFA and consumer groups to discuss and develop agreed guidelines.

6. Positive body image programs

WFA believes there should be positive body image programs in schools which provide the necessary media literacy skills children need to resist negative messages which serve to sexualise them and not treat them as whole people.

7. Reform of complaints processes to achieve more accessibility and accountability

Complaints mechanisms are unwieldy and difficult to understand and access by ordinary members of the public. A range of bodies are responsible for handling complaints about advertising, media and marketing. Each body is currently accessed through different complaints making and complaints

⁸⁰ Portrayal of women advisory committee, *The portrayal of women in outdoor advertising* (Melbourne, VIC: Victorian Government, 2002). Can be found at: [http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/Commstoolswomenoutdooradvertising/\\$file/Women%20in%20advertising%20outdoor.pdf](http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/Commstoolswomenoutdooradvertising/$file/Women%20in%20advertising%20outdoor.pdf)

hearing processes and accountability mechanisms are inconsistent. It takes much too long to get a determination.

WFA calls for implementation of a centralised administration to administer and channel complaints, creating a one-stop complaints point for the general public. Complaints would be received by complaints process experts who would direct the various complaints to the relevant responsible bodies. Principles of an effective, accountable and accessible complaints process would include:

- monthly turnaround times with requirements that responsible bodies respond within this monthly time frame with meaningful and accountable response processes.
- requirements for wider industry codes of conduct that would prohibit marketing practices that can harm children and adolescents through premature sexualisation, with requirements as above. Such codes should require responsible commercial behaviour, including in products and services marketing, music, entertainment marketing and broadcasting, that respects the developmental needs of children and youth and that also allows parents and guardians the reasonable capacity to limit or avoid exposure to products, messages or images judged developmentally inappropriate or harmful.

The Government should not underestimate the damaging impact on the next generation, should the issue of sexualisation not be properly addressed and dealt with.

**Women's Forum Australia
April 2008**