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SUBMISSION

TO THE SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEES

ON

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

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Promoting healthy choices and stronger voices in children's media

Australian Council on Children and the Media (incorporating Young Media Australia)
Patrons: Steve Biddulph Baroness Susan Greenfield
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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this matter..

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Board of the ACCM by Prof Elizabeth (President) and Ms Barbara Biggins OAM (Hon CEO).

1. INTRODUCTION TO AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL ON CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA

The ACCM is the peak not-for-profit national community organisation supporting families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining a media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children.

ACCM has a national Board representing the states and territories of Australia, and a membership of individuals and organisations including Early Childhood Australia, the Australian Council of State Schools Organisations, the Australian Primary Principals Association, the Australian Education Union, the Parenting Research Centre, the NSW Parents Council, the South Australian Primary Principals Association, and the Council of Mothers' Unions in Australia.

ACCM's core activities include the collection and review of research and information about the impact of media on children's development, and advocacy for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media.

Much of ACCMs work is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, which is the most authoritative document about how children and families fit into society. Article 3(1) provides that in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Further, article 18 states that governments have an obligation to support parents in fulfilling their responsibilities towards their children. This includes the responsibility of ensuring that they can access the mass media without being exposed to material that is injurious to their well-being (see article 17).

2. COMMENT ON TERMS OF REFERENCE

These are

Domestic violence and gender inequality, with particular reference to:

- a. the role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence;
- b. the role of gender stereotypes in contributing to cultural conditions which support domestic violence, including, but not limited to, messages conveyed to children and young people in:
 - i. the marketing of toys and other products,
 - ii. education, and
 - iii. entertainment;

- c. the role of government initiatives at every level in addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence, including the commitments under, or related to, the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children; and
- d. any other related matters.

ACCM wishes to comment on Terms of reference b. (i) and (iii), and c.

Noted Australian researcher Michael Flood (2007) argues that:

there is a compelling, three-fold rationale for directing violence prevention efforts at children and young people. First, males' and females' adult relationships are shaped in important ways by the norms and practices they take on in adolescence. Second, violence-supportive attitudes are already well established in adolescence, and patterns of physical and sexual violence are evident in some young people's intimate relations. Third, violence prevention education among children and youth has been shown to work.

Flood also notes:

Violence-supportive attitudes and norms are shaped by various other social influences, including popular media. A wide range of studies have documented relationships between tolerance for physical or sexual violence and exposure to particular imagery in pornography, television, film, advertising, and electronic games (Flood and Pease, 2006). Given the Australian evidence that substantial proportions of boys are regular consumers of X-rated video pornography and Internet pornography (Flood and Hamilton, 2003), this may prove to be a significant influence on boys' adherence to violence-supportive attitudes.

ACCM, while supporting these findings, argues that prevention work needs to start in early childhood. It's in the early years that children are first exposed, daily, to mass marketing for toys, and to promotions for movies, videogames and other screen based entertainment.

b.(i) messages conveyed to children and young people in the marketing of toys and other products.

Gender stereotypes abound in much of the entertainment and marketing to which children, including young children, are exposed. The characters frequently follow the stereotypes of the pretty, sexy, often helpless female, and the more powerful male character who rescues the female. This sets the scene for more mature dramas, where the stereotypical victim is a woman (Gerbner, 1994).

Further, much of the entertainment that children consume is dominated by portrayals of glamorised violence, ie violence done in a good cause by the hero who is justified, rewarded and applauded for being good at the violence. The message is that "Violence works and violence wins".

Frequently, mass- marketed toys are closely linked to entertainment. The toys are used in many cases as promotional tools for upcoming movies, even those not appropriate for children of the age that would normally use the toys. It has also been

noticed recently that even when a film has a strong female character, she will not necessarily be included in the toy spinoffs.

Blakemore (2005) and team reviewed a sample of 125 toys for young children and found that:

girls' toys were associated with physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skill, whereas boys' toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous. The toys rated as most likely to be educational and to develop children's physical, cognitive, artistic, and other skills were typically rated as neutral or moderately masculine. We conclude that strongly gender-typed toys appear to be less supportive of optimal development than neutral or moderately gender-typed toys.

As the US National Association for the Education of Young Children noted:

Strongly gender-typed toys might encourage attributes that aren't ones you actually want to foster. For girls, this would include a focus on attractiveness and appearance, perhaps leading to a message that this is the most important thing—to look pretty. For boys, the emphasis on violence and aggression (weapons, fighting, and aggression) might be less than desirable in the long run.

Another concern about toys connected to violent movies, is that such play continuing after the event of seeing the movie can reinforce the violent message of the movie. Schooler and Flora (1996) found that that the amount of time that a child spends fantasising about violent acts he or she has seen by playing with the toys, wearing the T shirt etc, is likely to increase the impact of the violence to which the child has been exposed in films and TV programs.

Clothing is another area of products which concern parents of young children. They report being unable to find clothing items, especially for girls who were big for their age, that didn't have sexy aspects to them.

Holmqvist (2015) notes that

Although media's objectification mostly targets adolescent and adult women, there are several examples of how young girls, too, are objectified. Fashion magazine Vogue recently published a photo spread of ten-year-old French child model Thylane Blondeau dressed in high heels and mini-skirt, provocatively gazing into the camera lens. However, we need not go to high fashion to find examples of girls' objectification; there is also an increasingly 'sexy' nature of the clothing that is marketed to and worn by average young girls (Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak 2011).

Not only are girls' clothes tighter, slimmer, and more revealing than boys' clothes, they often promote girls' self-objectification in the messages printed on them. Spanish fashion giant Zara's autumn collection 2011 for girls age 2-14 included t-shirts with puffed sleeves and the prints "Pretty princess" and "Do you think I'm gorgeous enough?" Several of the messages printed on the boys' t-shirts, on the other hand, encouraged boys to be independent and active, such as "Flying to the moon and back", and for baby boys, "Little pilot" (retrieved from www.zara.com on 20th October, 2011). Perhaps even stronger

evidence for the fashion industry's promotion of young girls' self-objectification is the thong [G-string] underwear for girls aged 7-10.

b (iii) messages conveyed to children and young people in entertainment.

Films and videogames: As mentioned above, films and videogames abound with female victims of male violence who are ultimately rescued by the 'good guy', who is also likely to commit acts of violence. Gerbner (1994) found that

Major characters who are "bad" are, of course, more likely to be killed than those portrayed as "good." But gender, race and age also matter. For every 10 positively valued men who kill, about 4 are killed. But for every 10 "good" women who kill, 6 are killed, and for every 10 women of color who kill, 17 are killed. Older women characters get involved in violence only to be killed.

The Cultural Indicators team calculated a violence "pecking order" by ranking the risk ratios of the different groups. Hurting and killing by most majority groups extracts a tooth for a tooth. Minority groups tend to pay a higher price for their show of force. Women, especially older women, children and youth, lower class, mentally disabled people and Asian Americans are at the bottom of the heap.

This tends to normalise violence against women, and also perhaps women's self-perception of helplessness as the female victim is more often than not rescued by a male character. A further problem arises from the glamorisation of the violence committed by the 'good guy'.

Children's exposure to these representations of gender roles start much earlier than most prevention programs do. This is particularly so considering the heavy marketing of M-rated films, with 'moderate' violence, to children under 8 via toys and other merchandise. Such marketing is not regulated in the way that direct advertising for the film is. In advertising there are requirements to display the classification symbol, but no such requirement exists in relation to toys, clothes, homewares and stationery for children. Indeed the merchandise is often available long before the classification is known. As a result of the merchandising, it is often a foregone conclusion, before the classification is known, that children too young to decode the messages of the film will see the film.

Another problem is the objectification of girls in advertising and entertainment, for example when girls are presented as merely decorative, or emphasis is placed on physical appearance as a measure of the individual's worth.

Quek (2014) finds that:

It is not only in adolescent and adult media that appearance ideals are endorsed and that the value of physical attractiveness is promoted. Media targeting very young children, too, consist of messages about appearance standards. Interestingly, such media particularly emphasizes the stereotype known as "what is beautiful is good" (and, in contrary, "what is ugly is bad") (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson 2004). In the Walt Disney films, for instance, the nice and sweet characters are typically portrayed as beautiful (e.g. Ariel of The Little Mermaid, Belle of Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty) whereas the evil characters are portrayed as ugly

(e.g. Ursula of The Little Mermaid, Cruella De Vil of 101 Dalmatians) (Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, & Martz 2010). Evidence indicates that children become aware of beauty ideals in society from an early age. Stereotyped views and values about beauty are endorsed already by elementary school children (Ricciardelli & McCabe 2001).

This can lead to self-objectification by girls themselves, and in turn to depression and a sense of worthlessness. (Tiggemann 2015) A girl who grows up with such a self-image is naturally more likely to be vulnerable to abusive and violent relationships.

Holmqvist concludes that

Sociocultural agents often exert influence concurrently and may interact with each other. For instance, the influence of media may interact with the influence of peers when girls engage in conversations with their friends about pop stars or models, and thereby reinforce the beauty ideal conveyed by media (Jones et al. 2004). The fact that the different agents work concurrently and interact with each other makes it complex to distinguish their importance in relation to each other. However, it has been suggested that the influence of media, which is one of the most investigated, is the most powerful (Tiggemann 2011).

Music videos present another set of concerns. (AAP 2009) As with popular music, the perception and the effect of music-video messages are important, because research has reported that exposure to violence, sexual messages, sexual stereotypes, and portrayal of substance abuse in music videos might produce significant changes in behaviours and attitudes of young viewers. The AAP states that

In studies performed to assess the reactions of young males exposed to violent rap music videos or sexist videos, participants reported an increased probability that they would engage in violence, a greater acceptance of the use of violence, and a greater acceptance of the use of violence against women than did participants who were not exposed to these videos

The National Classification Scheme

It is worth noting that our National Classification Scheme (NCS) does not include any classifiable elements relating to gender stereotypes and objectification. ACCM takes the view that the time has come to include such matters. That way they can be openly and systematically identified, and the public made aware of such content so they can make informed choices in that regard.

Moreover, even in the recognition of violence as a classifiable element, the guidelines need to be redrafted based on the evidence about the kinds of violence that carry the greatest risk of shaping thoughts, attitude and behaviours in undesirable ways. For example, the kind of glamorised violence discussed above is more likely to contribute to desensitisation, yet under the NCS it is likely to be seen as 'justified by context' and therefore to fit in a less restrictive classification. The 'justified by context' guideline would make sense if the NCS's aim were to express a moral response to violence, but if the aim is to protect children and help prevent them from developing undesirable attitudes, the guideline is likely to achieve the precise opposite.

c. The role of government initiatives at every level in addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence, including the commitments under, or related to, the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children

Improving media engagement: ACCM notes that the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children refers to 'improving media engagement'. We agree that this is an important strategy, but it seems to be limited to news and current affairs media. We submit that any future strategy should include engagement with social and entertainment media, as these too have an important role in shaping attitudes - arguably more important in the case of children and young people.

Changing the cultural attitudes of the young: The government has stated that it wants to change the cultural attitudes of the young towards the use of violence to solve conflict. If this is the case it must tackle the media messages, that "violence wins and violence works", repeated to children several times every day, and from their earliest years.

Support for parents of young children in early media management: ACCM would also like to see governmental action to support parents and carers in choosing appropriate, non-violent and stereotype-free entertainment for their children. This can include providing information identifying such material, but also information and training about why this is important and how it can benefit a child's development.

Sexualisation of children: We note that the national agency Our WATCH was tasked to 'deliver a national project that addresses the issue of the sexualisation of children. This project will respond to concerns about the impacts of the sexualisation of children on body image, self-esteem, cognitive and emotional development, health and wellbeing, and conceptualisation of gender and sexual roles.' If this has not happened, ACCM would support its future implementation; but we would also add that such programs are needed in relation to younger children than Our WATCH is briefed to serve.

National Classification Scheme: As already discussed, we also see it as essential that the National Classification System be overhauled so that the criteria are evidence-based and relevant to modern problems.

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