



**AASW**

**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

*Submission to the Queensland  
Parliamentary Inquiry into  
Sexually Explicit Outdoor  
Advertising*

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## Introduction

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The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the key professional body representing more than 7000 social workers throughout Australia. Social work is the profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life, and to the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society.

The AASW is in a unique position to comment on the ramifications and importance of sexually explicit outdoor advertising on the long-term health and wellbeing of children, families and communities. Significant numbers of Social Workers work in the child protection, family support, domestic violence and mental health fields in a range of roles including direct casework, management and policy. No other professional discipline is so immersed in the areas of knowledge relating to the inter-relationship of social policy and the lives of Australian children. Social Workers are recognised throughout the world as the core professional group in child wellbeing and protection policy, management and practice.

The AASW commends the Queensland Government for undertaking an Inquiry into the current regulations of outdoor advertising and whether reform, including legislative reform, is needed to protect children from being exposed to sexually explicit and inappropriate outdoor advertising. We provide the following submission in relation to ***Term of Reference 2a; the sexualisation of children and other adverse impacts on children through sexually explicit outdoor advertising.***

## General Comments

The sexualisation of children in the Australian media and the prevalence of sexually explicit outdoor advertising have been well documented by The Australia Institute (TAI) (2006) and the Advertising Standards Bureau (2010) respectively. While the evidence presented in these reports and in the following submission pertain to a variety of media forms, the AASW holds that the impacts of sexualisation and sexually explicit advertising are relevant and applicable across advertising mediums. Indeed, the AASW believes outdoor advertising requires particular consideration given it, unlike television and print media, is not easily mediated by parents or guardians. We believe this places an increased responsibility on government and regulatory bodies to consider and respond to the content and impacts of advertising in the public space.

The AASW believes the evidence presented here and elsewhere (see TAI 2006) demonstrates the role that sexualisation and sexually explicit advertising has on gender role socialisation and stereotypes. Gender role socialisation has long been associated with the prevalence of family violence and the victimisation of women and children, predominantly by men (Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse 2013). In addition, sexualisation and sexually explicit advertising has been shown to impact on a range of developmental outcomes including physical, psychological, relational and social health and wellbeing. As such, the AASW believes sexually explicit outdoor advertising has implications for children and families well beyond the products it intends to sell.

The AASW believes that social policy has a significant role to play in realising our Government's commitment, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to upholding and protecting the rights and best interests of children. The AASW recommends the Queensland government make the best interests of children the primary consideration in the matter of sexually explicit advertising and the sexualisation of children. To the degree that sexually explicit and sexualised advertising contributes to inappropriate and harmful gender norms and relational dynamics, as the following evidence will illustrate, the AASW recommends the Queensland Government also consider their obligations under article 2 (non-discrimination) and article 4 (protection of rights) of the UNCRC appropriate to

protecting the health, wellbeing and safety of children.

For the purposes of this submission, the adverse impacts on children of sexualisation and sexually explicit outdoor advertising are organised according to a range of domains including developmental, psychological and societal harms, however the AASW wishes to point out that these harms cannot be delineated in practice and as such, suggests that advertising with sexualising content is capable of contributing to harms in all the domains outlined below.

The AASW trusts that the following commentary assists the Queensland Government and welcomes further opportunity to contribute to this significant review.

## 1. Developmental Impacts

Human sexual development commences in childhood and is a normal part of development. The AASW believes however that the sexualisation of children, when understood as the process of “capturing and moulding”<sup>1</sup> childhood sexuality and identity into stereotypical adult forms of relating and behaving, has the capacity to derail this natural process. This derailment is deleterious not only to a child’s sexual development, but to a broad range of inter-related physical, psychological, relational and societal outcomes.

- 1.1. Children are reaching puberty earlier however cognitive and emotional development is not progressing at the same pace, thus rendering children “ill-equipped to deal with sexualising pressure” (TAI 2006, p. 36).
- 1.2. Advertising idealises a particular kind of male and female body, specifically one that is slim, toned and in the case of women, slender but shapely (TAI 2006, p. 35). A number of studies suggest that exposure to such ideals through the media is associated with an increased prevalence of eating disorders (see Strasburger 2005 and Field et al 1999).
- 1.3. The Australian Medical Association (2002, p. 1 as cited in TAI 2006) has identified with the view that increasing numbers of children are focusing on their body image and commencing diets at younger ages. It also asserts that marketing and advertising contribute to this problem because of its portrayal of ‘physical perfection’. The age at which children are being hospitalised with eating disorders is falling (TAI, Appendix 1).
- 1.4. Eating disorders and inappropriate dieting in childhood has the capacity to impact on growth and physical functioning. Impacts may include vitamin and mineral deficiencies, bowel dysfunction, tooth decay, dehydration and a reduced ability to think and learn. This then has ongoing implications for the overall health and wellbeing of children and young people and the associated social, emotional and economic costs to the individual and society.
- 1.5. The link between sexualisation in the media and poor sexual health outcomes was recently explored by The Australia Institute (2006, pp. 36-38), which found that sexualisation contributes to an increased risk of sexualised and attention seeking behaviours at an earlier age. The earlier onset of puberty, coupled with increased sexualised behaviour contributes to

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<sup>1</sup> The Australia Institute, 2006, Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia, retrieved 13 June 2013 < <http://apo.org.au/research/corporate-paedophilia-sexualisation-children-australia-0>

an increased risk of unwanted sexual encounters and / or infection with sexually transmitted diseases (TAI 2006, p. 43).

- 1.6. In addition, sexualisation, particularly for girls, leads young people to spend a disproportionate amount of their time, money and mental energy on conforming to stereotypes and being deflected from age and developmentally appropriate activities that might contribute to ongoing general health and wellbeing. (Lamb and Brown (2006, p. 14), for example TAI 2006, p. 45 state that:

*"The opportunity cost to children of focusing on developing a sexualised appearance and personality is that they will thereby have less time to devote to other things. This is a general harm that is additional to the specific physical, psychological and sexual harms related to the sexualisation of children. It is also widely recognised that body image concerns, in conjunction with the uniforms often required in organised sport, act as a barrier to teenage girls' participation in sport (ECITARC 2006, pp. 29-30). As body ideals are now being marketed more heavily to younger girls, it is likely that such concerns will also begin to affect their participation in sport.*

*There is a risk that sexualisation will lead children, and in particular girls, to spend a large proportion of their time on conforming to sexual stereotypes, and being distracted from other activities that may well contribute more to their short and longer term happiness. Although paying some attention to physical appearance is important and may be enjoyable to children, excessive focus on particular forms of physical appearance is likely to limit children's overall development rather than foster it (TAI 2006, p. 45)"*

The AASW wishes to bring these statements to the attention of the Inquiry, as they speak to the issue of 'unregulated outdoor advertising'. In addition this research makes the following statement which is relevant.

*"It is sometimes claimed by the advertising and marketing industries that they merely reflect prevailing community values and standards, and as such, cannot be blamed for various undesirable social effects. However the opposing view is almost unanimous among humanities and social science scholars: advertising and marketing functions as a 'distorted mirror', reinforcing only a particular set of cultural values and symbols (TAI 2006, p. 45)."*

## 2. The Media and Gender Role Socialisation

The AASW concurs with many researchers who have identified the significant role that the media has in influencing gender role socialisation. The media can be a powerful medium through which social values and mores are shaped. In relation to children and young people, this then means that as a society we have an important responsibility to ensure that how we represent children and young people and how we communicate with them is not exploitative for the purposes of short-term gain for particular corporations and vested interests. The long-term implications on a child and young persons' physical, emotional and health wellbeing are too significant, as are the costs to our community.

- 2.1** The sexualisation of children and sexually explicit advertising reinforce and reflect a specific set of cultural and societal values. Lafky et al (1996, p. 380) looked at the impact stereotypical images of women has on teenagers and concluded that media shapes the “lenses of gender” and “influence[s] the ways individuals socially construct reality and produce (and reproduce) gender traits”.
- 2.2.** Linn (2005) and Durham (1998) identify a range of messages implicit in advertising and media including:
- Gender and sex role stereotypes
  - What it takes to be attractive
  - How men and women treat each other
  - What is valuable about being a man or woman

Examples of studies reflecting these implicit messages are outlined below.

- 2.3** A study by Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus and Berkowitz (1996) considers how teenagers view stereotypical images of women in magazines. They concluded that the primary sexual role of women is defined culturally as having to either reject or accept male advances – with no in-between. Male sexuality is presented as naturally aggressive, uncontrollable and unproblematic. Girls on the other hand are expected to define themselves, and be defined, through their bodies. Therefore, how teenage girls’ sexuality is constructed can be seen to continue to encourage and maintain social power dynamics where girls remain sexually subordinate.
- 2.4** Ashworth (2001) highlights just how children and their families are influenced by the advertising campaigns and media representations of young children. Ashworth argues that female vocalists for example, such as Britney Spears and Beyonce Knowles, become role models for young girls and that related advertising promotes a particular wardrobe and accessories. In addition to shaping young women’s image of what is desirable, Ashworth (2001) points out the impact on the family unit as parents try and curb the resulting children’s desire to wear high heels and bare midriffs at the age of nine.
- 2.5** Garner, Sterk and Adams (1998) in their paper “Narrative Analysis of Sexual Etiquette in Teenage Magazines” analyse advice columns, which are popular in magazines read by teenagers. They highlight the importance teenagers place on the media as a source of information, influencing their behaviour, attitudes and sexuality. The authors conclude that magazines serve as a way of maintaining gendered norms, which define women’s sexuality and socialisation within narrow heterosexual norms. This involves encouraging young girls to assume subordinate roles.

An article by Pierce (1993) “Socialization of teenage girls through teen-magazines fiction: the making of a new woman or old lady?” also supports the argument that this form of media can influence the socialisation of girls to reflect traditional stereotypes.

- 2.6** Durham (1998) points to the related economic pressure on girls in particular and their families as these ideologies and images are presented in conjunction with the necessary products to help achieve the ideal.
- 2.7** While these examples do not solely relate to sexualisation and sexually explicit images in outdoor media, a recent study by TAI (2006, pp11-12) demonstrates that outdoor advertising

contains the same problematic themes and imagery. Their study highlighted three outdoor advertisements in particular that sexualised children. In one instance sexualised images of children were used to sell Barbie products to other children. In two instances sexualised images of children were used to sell products to adults. They also stated very clearly that they believed the examples they located represented a “very small proportion of all such images”.

- 2.8 The Australia Institute’s (2006) paper titled ‘Corporate Paedophilia: The sexualisation of children in Australia’ provides a comprehensive overview and discussion of the sexualisation and socialisation of Australian children through a range of medium including outdoor advertising. They conclude that “the sexualisation of Australian children in advertising and marketing is increasing and involves a wide range of risks to children” (TAI 2006, p. 51).
- 2.9 Durham (1998) argues that media institutions help to promote these dominant ideologies and discourses of society and that mass media represents things as being universal, natural and part of reality. These ideologies continue to socialise girls in roles that are advantageous to men and submissive for women. Advertising therefore is a powerful medium insofar as it can support existing power structures, further legitimising them.

### 3. Psychological and Societal Harms emerging from Gender Role Socialisation

- 3.1. Sweeney (1999, p. 1) argues that while “...teenage models and actresses are continually glorified by the mass media in their nymph-beauty state, real-life teenage girls are being scrutinised as an ‘at risk’ population by many scholars and journalists”. Sweeney (1999) explores how the ultra-thin bodies of the idealised “teenage girl-woman” embodied in media images of models, celebrities and actresses, for example, have contributed to chronic issues with low self-esteem, eating disorders, self-harm, teenage pregnancy (although declining in recent years), sexually transmitted diseases and suicide.
- 3.2. The link between sexualisation and sexual health as outlined in point 1.5 above is compounded by psychological harms. Durham (1998) found that girls in particular are pressured by the media to be sexually alluring while also being responsible for being chaste and virginal. Durham (1998) also found the resultant confusion and denial of sexual feelings can result in severe physical and emotional distress.
- 3.3. Tebbel (2000, p.xii) argues that more than ten years after Naomi Wolf published *The Beauty Myth* and Susie Orbach published *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, women are more confused than ever about their bodies. She attributes this to the powerful role that the media plays in women and girls lives in terms of how it represents women as “nothing more than sexual commodities” (Tebbel, 2000, p.xii).
- 3.4. The Australia Institute (2006, p. 39) suggests a link between the sexualisation of children in the media and the risk of normalising paedophilia. The AASW believes the available literature is inconclusive and recommends the need for further research in this area.

While a causal link between sexualised images of children in the media and sexual offending has not been established, there is at least some evidence that the media contributes to the formation of relationships between adult men and women under the age of 18 years. Sweeney (1999) provides the example of a 1997 documentary of teenage motherhood,



indicating that men over the age of 21 years father more than 50% of babies born to teenage women aged 15 to 17. The media, Sweeney (1999) argues, presents images that encourage closeness between older men and younger women, whilst at the same time, reinforcing a rift between mothers and mother figures and young women.

- 3.5. Asher (2002, p. 24) argues that psychological and societal harms cannot be addressed without addressing the infrastructure that underpins them.

#### 4. The Commodification of Children

- 4.1 Related to the issue of human rights and best interests of children, is the issue of commodification. The AASW is concerned that the commodification of children has increasingly become a lucrative market for advertisers.
- 4.2 Smith (2002) in an article titled 'Oh baby what have we done?' discusses how children have been targeted as customers in their own right. She asserts that the issue of sexualisation of children in the media also involves transforming children into a discrete consumer group. While this is a complex issue the AASW supports the view that this cannot be seen as a distinct issue. The fact that the media can target children as consumers is the first step to then selling them these sexualised images.
- 4.3 Smith (2002) argues that corporations are increasingly targeting children. Harvard Psychiatrist Susan Linn estimates the US market to be \$300 billion on family spending annually, with an estimated \$12 billion per year targeted on advertising directed to children alone. In the UK the figure is 2 billion pounds.
- 4.4 Smith (2002) argues that children under the age of six find it difficult to distinguish between an advertisement and a program, not fully understanding the purpose of the advertisement. It is only when children reach 12, it is argued, that their understanding of advertising develops to the point of understanding its purpose. Therefore, targeting children under these ages is inappropriate and misleading. The other issue is that advertisements that promise 'solutions' can create a desire in children for the product – a problem when children have difficulties putting limits on their wants and on what is realistic and what is not.

The AASW agrees this is problematic given children are more open, lack cynicism, and are less discriminating of advertising and therefore, we argue, are a more impressionable group to target. (A recent hysteria to purchase the latest Harry Potter book on the day of release could be considered an example of this).

- 4.5 Sweden and Norway have banned advertising aimed directly at children, with other countries introducing tighter regulations (Smith 2002). The AASW believes further consideration of how advertising aimed at children has been addressed in these nations is worth further attention.



## 5. Conclusion

The AASW agrees that the media has a part to play in gender role socialisation and thus commends the Queensland Government for its attention to sexually explicit outdoor advertising and its impact on children. In light of available research, the AASW supports a carefully constructed approach to regulation which quite clearly promotes the safety and wellbeing of children. In a contemporary age where social research can and should help develop the policies which shape our society, all efforts should be made to delve into this research and expert advice to inform these policies. The social, psychological and emotional development of children (and their families) will be influenced by such decisions. The government's role is then to balance and temper this with the demands of the commercial community.

Submitted for and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd



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