

## Submission from the Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust For the National Classification Scheme Review

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15 July 2011

### Introduction

The Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission's Issue Paper on the National Classification Scheme Review.

Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust was established in 1994 to manage the historic Queen Victoria Women's Centre (QVWC) in the heart of Melbourne for the benefit of Victorian women. The Trust also provides programs that build the capacity of women, with a strategic focus on media literacy to promote young women's positive body image and financial literacy to promote women's economic security and independence.

The Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust is deeply concerned about the media's continued negative and harmful portrayals of women and girls including:

- Limited and stereotypical notions of gender at the expense of diversity
- Narrow definitions of 'beauty' and unrealistic and unhealthy 'thin body ideals'
- Misrepresentation of body image through digital image manipulation
- Sexualisation and objectification of women, especially young women and girls

Urgent action is needed to respond to the incidence of body dissatisfaction reported by young people. Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians (2010) reports that body image, that is the way that people think and feel about their bodies, is the top issue of personal concern for all Australian young people, with young women aged 15-19 years ranking it a proportionally higher concern than young men. Further the Survey suggests that more than 75% of teenage girls and 50% of boys report being dissatisfied with their bodies. Kate Ellis MP, Minister for the Status of Women, states that about half of Australian girls and a third of boys, who are in a healthy weight range, think that they are overweight (2010).

Unrealistic, photo shopped and stereotyped images used by the media, advertising and fashion industries is a pervasive social factor shaping young people's perceptions of themselves and other people. Media internalisation, that is pressure to look like the idealised images portrayed in the media, contributes to alarmingly high levels of body dissatisfaction, a risk factor for developing low self-esteem, depression and unhealthy weight loss and control behaviours<sup>1</sup>.

Alarmingly, narrow gender stereotypes are still pervasive across all media "with boys appearing as dominant, active and aggressive and girls as shy, giggly and passive"<sup>2</sup>. Gender stereotypes further damage self-esteem and limit young people's aspirations and life choices.

The QVWC is taking action through the SeeMe Program which is developing an online media-literacy resource that challenges gender stereotyping and promotes a critical analysis of the portrayals of women and girls in the media. SeeMe builds on the QVWC's previous work with young women and the publication of *'Young Women, Body Image and the Digital Age'*, an online information and activity kit focusing on media literacy.

The QVWC also believes the media also has a significant role in better promoting positive body image and better portraying the diverse roles women play in our modern society. This Review is a timely opportunity to ensure that Australian community and consumer concerns around the media's portrayal of women are reflected in the National Classification Scheme.

Drawing on our experience as a leading women's organisation that actively promotes positive body image, the QVWC would like to respond specifically to questions 15 and 21 of the ALRC's Issues Paper in relation to media content.

**Question 15: When content should be required to display classification markings, warnings or consumer advice? Consumer advice on digitally altered images**

The QVWC supports the *Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image* which recommends that media and advertising should use realistic and natural images of people, and 'Make consumers aware of the extent to which images of people have been manipulated'<sup>3</sup>. It recommends:

*When using technology to digitally alter images of people, organisations that support good practice in the use of realistic and natural images of people are encouraged to:*

- *refrain from enhancing images in a way that changes a person's body shape, for example by lengthening a person's legs, tightening their waist or changing his or her body size*
- *refrain from removing moles, freckles and other permanent distinguishing marks*
- *ensure skin tones remain natural and refrain from smoothing over creases and lines*
- *ensure that where alterations are made to an image of a person... it results in the image remaining as close to natural as possible and not resulting in a significant change to the image (except where the intent is to produce an image that is not realistic)*
- *disclose images that have been retouched.*

The QVWC believes that increasing consumers, in particular young women and girls', awareness of the use of digitally altered images can help to reduce the media internalisation of unhealthy and unrealistic images used across the media, advertising and fashion industries.

**The QVWC recommends that the *National Classification Code* should incorporate the requirement for consumer advice labels on all images that have been digitally altered.**

**Question 21: Is there a need for new classification categories and, if so, what are they? Should any existing classification categories be removed or merged?**

The QVWC is concerned about media portrayals that depict female dependency, objectification and victimisation. Such portrayals can desensitise communities to the very real experience of violence against women and can contribute to violence against women.<sup>4</sup>

Objectification is not currently identified as a separate factor in the *Australian Association of National Advertisers' Advertiser Code of Ethics*. This restricts consumers' ability to identify and make complaints about instances of media portrayals that objectify women.

The *Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's Review of the National Classification Scheme* recommends:

*... the fourth key principle in the National Classification Code should be expanded to take into account community concerns about the sexualisation of society, and the objectification of women<sup>5</sup>.*

The QVWC supports this recommendation and Women's Health Victoria's recommendation that the *National Classification Scheme* should incorporate a separate category for responding to the objectification of women, which is prevalent in advertising and television content, music video content as well as emerging media content including online and mobile content.

**The QVWC recommends that the *National Classification Scheme* should be expanded to encompass measures that specifically address objectification of women, either visually or lyrically.**

The Trust looks forward to seeing the outcomes of the Review, and to seeing an amended Code of Ethics that reflects women's concerns.

Catherine Brown  
Chair  
Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust

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1 Australian Government Office for Youth (2009) "Body Image Information Paper" www.youth.gov.au

2 Livingstone, S and Milwood Hargrave, A (2006). "Harm and Offence in Media Content: A review of the evidence". Intellect Ltd, Bristol. p167

3 Australian Government. Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct. 2010 [cited 30 June 2011]. Available from:

<http://www.youth.gov.au/bodyImage/codeofconduct/Pages/VoluntaryIndustryCodeofConductonBodyImage.aspx>

4 State Government of Victoria, 2010, "Right to Respect Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence against Women 2010-2020"

5 The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee. Review of the National Classification Scheme: achieving the right balance. 2011 [cited 27 June 2011]. Available from:

[http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon\\_ctte/classification\\_board/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/classification_board/report/index.htm)