WomanACT
WOMAN ABUSE COUNCIL OF TORONTO

OPEN LETTER TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION REGARDING ONTARIO'S SEX EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Submitted via email to: lisa.thompson@pc.ola.org

The Honourable Lisa Thompson
Ministry of Education
Mowat Block 22nd Floor
900 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

July 20, 2018

Dear Minister Thompson,

As an organization committed to women's safety and gender equality, we are very concerned about the announcement by the Ministry of Education to roll back Ontario's sexual health education curriculum in the upcoming school year.

Comprehensive sexual health education that is inclusive, rights-based and promotes gender equality has an important role in preventing violence against women. There is a growing evidence base and awareness that curricula including education on consent and healthy relationships will support the prevention of violence against women and advance gender equality.[1] The importance of comprehensive sexual health education is further affirmed across international conventions and human right standards.[2]

Schools are well placed to shift the social norms, attitudes and behaviours that underpin violence against women. To this end, the curriculum must incorporate concepts of gender and power relations and must reflect and respond to the lived realities of young people.

Violence against women is a critical issue across Canada and we must be looking at our education system as a means to prevent violence against women. Just this month, the Canadian Femicide Conservatory released its mid-year report showing that in 2018 alone, 78 women and girls have died as a result of femicide in Canada. Forty-one of these women and girls were in Ontario. With such shocking numbers of

[1] UNESCO (2009) *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators*. Paris: UNAIDS, UNFPA, Unicef, World Health Organization; GenPol (2017) *Can education stop abuse? Comprehensive Sexuality Education Against Gender-Based Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Gender & Policy Insights CIC; Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (2015) *Sexual Health Education in the Schools: Questions and Answers Updated 2015 Ontario edition*. Toronto, ON: Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).
[2] See Appendix A.

women and girls dying as a result of dating and intimate-partner violence, we need to commit to a sex education curriculum that speaks to young people about healthy relationships and deconstructs pervasive and misogynistic gender norms.

With the rise in cyberbullying, the curriculum must cover children's rights online and explore how children and young people can protect themselves and respect others online.

Sexual health education is more than words written on a curriculum document. It is about promoting critical conversations in schools among young people — conversations about gender, sexuality, choice, boundaries and rights. We want the Government of Ontario to send the message that these are vital conversations that must be encouraged and fostered.

We understand that a consultation is being planned in the near future, and we would appreciate being included in your consultative process.

Respectfully,

Harmy Mendoza
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The following WomanACT general members co-sign this letter:

1. Ernestine's Shelter for Women
2. Springtide Resources
3. Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
4. Nellie's Shelter for Women
5. Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic
6. Catholic Family Services Toronto
7. METRAC Action on Violence
8. WoodGreen Red Door Family Shelter
9. Working Women Community Centre
10. Elizabeth Fry Toronto
11. YWCA Toronto
12. Interval House
13. Yorktown Family Services

The following Ontario-based organizations co-sign this letter:

14. OCASI — Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
15. Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre
16. Harmony House, Ottawa
17. OCRCC – Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres
18. Anova, London
19. Rainy River District Women's Shelter of Hope, Atikokan
20. Thunder Bay and District Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse
21. Women's Place of South Niagara
22. NOW — Network of Women with Disabilities
23. Community Counselling Centre of Nipissing, North Bay
24. Southwest Region VAW Coordinating Committee, Ontario
25. Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes
26. Maison Interlude House, Hawkesbury
27. Canadian Mental Health Association, Men's Program, Grey-Bruce
28. Interim Place, Mississauga
29. Colibri — Centre des femmes francophones du comté de Simcoe, Barrie
30. Centre Novas-CALACS francophone de Prescott-Russell, Casselman
31. Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre, Toronto

32. OAITH — Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Houses
33. City for All Women Initiative, Ottawa
34. Centre Victoria pour femmes, Sudbury
35. Assaulted Women's and Children's Counsellor/Advocate Program, George Brown College, Toronto
36. Women's Rural Resource Centre, Strathroy
37. Manitoulin Family Resources, Manitoulin Island
38. Mnidoo Mnising Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Manitoulin Island
39. Simcoe County Violence Against Women Coordinating Committee
40. Immigrant Women's Services Ottawa
41. Centre Passerelle pour femmes du nord de l'Ontario, Timmins
42. Woman Abuse Working Group / Coalition d'action contre la violence faite aux femmes, Hamilton
43. Counselling and Family Services, Ottawa
44. Sexual Assault Network, Ottawa
45. Timmins Family Violence Interagency Action Committee
46. InCommunities, Niagara-Hamilton
47. Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women
48. Centre de counselling de Sudbury/ Sudbury Counselling Centre, Sudbury
49. Green Haven Shelter for Women, Orillia
50. Design for a New Tomorrow, St. Catharines
51. Girls Incorporated of Upper Canada, Brockville
52. Coalition de Prescott-Russell pour éliminer la violence faite aux femmes, Plantagenet
53. Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, University of Western Ontario, London
54. For Youth Initiative, Toronto
55. Emily Murphy Centre, Stratford

The following organizations from other provinces in Canada co-sign this letter:

56. Women's Health Clinic, Winnipeg, Manitoba
57. WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre, Vancouver, British Columbia
58. Yukon Status of Women Council, Whitehorse, Yukon
59. Relais-femmes, Organisme féministe de liaison et de transfert de connaissances, Montreal, Quebec
60. Antigonish Women's Resource Centre & Sexual Assault Services Association, Antigonish, Nova Scotia

61. Réseau d'action pour l'égalité des femmes immigrées et racisées du Québec (RAFIQ), Montreal, Quebec
62. Minerva, British Columbia
63. End Violence Across Manitoba Inc. (EVA Manitoba), Winnipeg, Manitoba
64. West Central Women's Resource Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba
65. Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes, Montreal, Quebec
66. Before it Happens, Reducing Violence Against Women and Girls, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
67. Manitoba Association of Women's Shelters Inc. (MAWS)
68. Fédération des femmes du Québec
69. Ending Violence Association of British Columbia
70. Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba
71. Sexual Assault Crisis Centre, Fredericton, Nova Scotia
72. MOSAIC, Vancouver, British Columbia
73. La Maison ISA-CALACS, Saguenay, Quebec
74. Women's Network P E I

The following Canada-wide organizations co-sign this letter:

75. Canadian Women's Foundation
76. Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne
77. Maytree Foundation
78. Ending Violence Association of Canada

The following Individuals co-sign this letter:

79. Bilkis Vissandjée, Professor, School of Nursing and Public Health, Université de Montréal
80. Lilia Goldfarb, M.A., Directrice des programmes (Programs Director), Y des femmes de Montréal (YWCA, Montreal)
81. Bonnie Woodhouse, Community Justice Worker, Pinaymootang First Nation, Fairford, Manitoba
82. Katreena Scott, Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the University of Toronto, and Canada Research Chair in Family Violence Prevention and Intervention
83. Brenda Lamb, Pedagogical Advisor, Information and Communication Technology, John Abbott College

84. Delphine Melchert, Before it Happens, Reducing Violence Against Women and Girls, Prince Albert Saskatchewan
85. Dawn Wilson
86. Deborah Sinclair, MSW, PhD(c), RSW, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
87. Karine Côté, Professor of Psychology, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada

APPENDIX A

United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) Platform for Action (PFA):

"The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences."[3]

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child:

"The Committee calls upon States parties to develop and implement, in a manner consistent with adolescents' evolving capacities, legislation, policies and programmes to promote the health and development of adolescents by … (b) providing adequate information and parental support to facilitate the development of a relationship of trust and confidence in which issues regarding, for example, sexuality and sexual behaviour and risky lifestyles can be openly discussed and acceptable solutions found that respect the adolescent's rights."[4]

United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

"The Committee interprets the right to health, as defined in article 12.1, as an inclusive right extending not only to timely and appropriate health care but also to the underlying determinants of health, such as… access to health-related education and information, including on sexual and reproductive health."[5]

"To eliminate discrimination against women, there is a need to develop and implement a comprehensive national strategy for promoting women's right to health throughout their life span. Such a strategy should include interventions aimed at the prevention and treatment of diseases affecting women, as well as policies to provide access to a full range of high quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive services. A major goal should be reducing women's health risks, particularly lowering rates of maternal mortality and protecting women from domestic violence. The realization of women's right to health requires the removal of all barriers interfering with access to health services, education and information, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health."[6]

International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action (POA):

"The objectives are: (a) To promote adequate development of responsible sexuality, permitting relations of equity and mutual respect between the genders and contributing to improving the quality of life of individuals; (b) To ensure that women and men have access to the information, education and services needed to achieve good sexual health and exercise their reproductive rights and responsibilities."[7]

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[3] UN. 1995. United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Platform for Action. New York: UN.
[4] UN. 2003. United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment 4: Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). CRC/GC/2003/4. New York: UN.
[5] UN. 2000. United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Substantive issues arising in the implementation of the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights. General Comment No. 14. E/C.12/2000/4. New York: UN.
[6] Ibid.
[7] UN. 1994. International Conference on Population and Development. Programme of Action. New York: UN.