

## Written evidence submitted by Professor Jessica Ringrose (BYC064)

### Executive Summary

This submission outlines key findings around sexualisation, gender, sexuality and body image drawn from international research and over a decade of international research and from the investigators own projects. The methodologies informing these projects are sociological including qualitative focus groups, interviews and online observations, which places young people's voices and communications at the centre of the research. These methods offer often neglected in-depth, first hand and contextually rich experiences of how young people understand and navigate appearance norms and body image issues both online and in and around schools.

### Research Basis

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| 2008    | Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Knowledge Lab IOE, Young people's negotiations of online social networking sites (with Dr Rebekah Willett, IOE)   |
| 2009-11 | ESRC, Pornified? Complicating the debates about the sexualisation of culture, (with Prof Rosalind Gill, Kings College, Professor Emma Renold, Cardiff University)  |
| 2011-12 | NSPCC, Children, Young people and 'sexting (with Professor Rosalind Gill, Kings College, Professor Sonia Livingstone, LSE, Laura Harvey, Open University)  |
| 2013    | Monash University Faculty of Arts Research Project Fund Grant Program, Youth, Mobile Technologies and Gender Politics: Young People's Beliefs About Gender and Ethical Use of Communication Technologies (International collaborator with Dr. Amy Shields Dobson, Dr. Mary Lou Rasmussen and Dr. Danielle Tyson, Monash University, Australia) |
| 2014-16 | Society for Research on Adolescence, Adolescent girls' negotiating sexualization: Exploring and evaluating UK and USA experiences (with Professor Deborah Tolman, Graduate Centre, CUNY, New York, USA).   |

- 2014-16 Cardiff University Impact Accelerator Fund: Feminist Activism in Schools, (with Professor Emma Renold, Cardiff University)
- 2014-16 AHRC, Documenting Digital Feminist Activism: Mapping Feminist Responses to New Media Misogyny and Rape Culture (with Dr Kaitlynn Mendes, University of Leicester and Dr Jessalynn Keller, University of Calgary Canada)
- 2015-16 Office of Children's Commissioner, England, Young People's Understandings of Gender (with Prof Emma Renold Cardiff University, Prof Carolyn Jackson University of Lancaster, and Dr Sara Bragg, University of Brighton)
- 2017-18 UCL Seed Fund, Gender and Sexual Equity in Schools (GASES) (with Dr Olga Cara, UCL Institute of Education)

### **About THE INVESTIGATOR:**

I have been conducting research on gender and sexual inequalities in education for over 15 years and considered an international expert in this area. I am co-chair of the International Gender and Education Association (GEA). I have acted as academic advisor for The British Council, Womankind Worldwide, Family Lives, Beat Bullying, and consultant for: The Sexualisation of Young People Review, 2010; Scottish Parliament Report on Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children, 2010. I was a founding member of the UK Government Equalities Office 'Body Confidence Campaign' for young people. I worked with Diane Abbott MP on her influential speech to the Fabian Women's Network on the sexualisation of society (2013). My co-authored report on young people and sexting for the NSPCC has been noted as 'ground breaking' (Phippen, 2012) and helped raise awareness nationally and internationally about the implications of social media for young people's sexual relationships, safety and well-being. The report informed international law (Victoria Australia law reform), national third sector guidelines on sex and relationship education (Sex Education Forum), internet controls (Vodafone), and has underpinned sexual bullying resources for schools (Teen Boundaries). In 2015 I co-founded the GEA Gender Equality Leadership in Schools (GELS) Network that links academics, schools, students and charitable organizations to support school feminism clubs, groups and societies in combatting sexism and sexual harassment in and around schools.

#### **1. Are groups of young people particularly prone to poor body image?**

Girls and young women are disproportionately prone to poor body image but this is specific to racial and class demographics and contexts. Sociological research explores the social specificity and context of which bodies of which young people experience oppression around body and appearance norms.

Body image problems are strongly related to the sexualisation of girls internationally (APA, 2004; Papadopoulous, 2010; Bailey Review, 2012; Renold and Ringrose,

2013). Research on sexualisation of girls has demonstrated that girls value sexiness and a sexy appearance strongly and that self-sexualisation has negative consequences (Tolman et al., 2015). This research has focused primarily on girls as victims of sexualisation who feel pressure to self-sexualise in relation to social norms of appearance. Research has also noted that the adult-driven agendas have not taken girls' perspectives on sexualization nor how they make sense of and navigate them into account (Egan, 2013).

Sociological and feminist research explores the contextualised norms of appearance, body image norms, and ideals of beauty and codes of 'sexiness', that are socially imposed (Bartky, 1998; Connell, 2002; Evans and Riley, 2014). Feminist scholars are interested in how norms of body shape, boy image and bodily perfection are cultivated by mainstream media and advertising setting up impossible ideals (Gill, 2006). This research also shows how the 'male gaze' and sexual objectification of women's bodies is historically stemming from the commodification of female bodies for male consumption and pleasure.

### *Racism and white privilege shape beauty norms and ideas*

Norms of appearance and bodies are hierarchical across culture and context: where certain racial norms (whiteness) and class norms (middle class sensibility) as well as heterosexual norms are constructed as the most desirable, although the specific manifestation depends on the group context (Figuro, 2013). This is an intersectional approach to understanding inequality where gender, race, class and sexuality need to be considered together (Showunmi, 2017). Global idealised beauty norms centre around being white or pale skinned, slim, yet also curvaceous and having right sized breasts (Lazar, 2008). Norms of 'sexy' or sexiness are also constructed through Eurocentric norms of white beauty codes including thin-ness, fair skin and other forms of bodily or what Hakim calls erotic capitals. Some suggest that the beauty norms in celebrity culture are a form of white supremacy where advertisers 'white out' actors and models for instance (Jackson-Lowman, nd).

### *A competitive heterosexual matrix and compulsory heterosexuality shape appearance norms*

Body image issues are strongly related to gender and sexual double standards amongst boys and girls (Jackson and Cram, 2003). Ideals of heterosexual attractiveness adhere to a gender binary, which negates gender diversity, and heteronormativity, which privileges heterosexual codes of attractiveness. Young people who do not fit within these norms or expectations around appearance may experience harassment or abuse (Ringrose and Renold, 2010).

### *Girls*

Teen girls frequently relate being find that being sexually attractive can lead to being sexually harassed primarily by boys and men (Renold, 2013). There are also harsh social and cultural hierarchies between girls because of a competitive heterosexual context where girls are supposed to compete for boys' attention and to feel valued when they receive it (Ringrose, 2011). Research also shows many girls are aware and highly critical of heterosexual double standards and girls of all ages talked about

their bodies as being “constantly judged and valued” (Renold 2013: 39; Ringrose et al., 2012).

Diverse girls navigate or make sense of these specific appearance norms around ‘sexy’ femininity in different ways. Sharon Lamb and colleagues (2017) found that the non-white girls in her research wanted to take pride in non-white ideals of black beauty, but they had trouble negotiating profoundly racist norms of black women’s sexualisation. Non-white girls lacked a vocabulary for addressing the racialised conflicts between them and would end up demonizing and objectifying sexualised black women in hip hop videos as disrespecting themselves (for instance). In Ringrose and Tolman’s research (forthcoming) looking at experiences across London and New York City we found White girls, struggled to easily embody normative ideals of white sexiness, but they critiqued black women and girls as unable to be viewed as sexy, and we found that they understood sexy as predicated on the denigration of Black women’s bodies in terms of size and shadism (Figuro, 2013). We found Black girls tried to reject these norms but struggled with social media using photo apps to whiten the shade of their images due to pressure about shade and whitening their appearance.

### *Boys*

Boys also struggle to embrace idealised masculinities (Haywood and MacanGhail, 2013). That is being strong and sexually experienced and sporty, as this comes out differently in various contexts. Pressure for boys it is also related to skin tone and muscles and how they perform their masculinity, so we see new trends of taking steroids and drugs to enhance muscles, new pressures around the gym and fitness (Kehler, 2016).

### *Trans Youth*

Non-binary, gender fluid, non-conforming and trans youth represent an issue of pressing concern in the UK and globally, with experiences of bullying and harassment at school strongly related to oppressive gendered body norms (Smith and Payne, 2016). Trans young people experience gender dysmorphia, in that they find the gender norms of masculinity and/or femininity impossible to fit into, which then creates risks and harms in environments like school which typically strongly enforce gender binaries (Jones et al., 2016). In the UK, the group Mermaids is a support group for transgender youth and parents, whilst Stonewall is prioritizing transgender youth support in their recent campaigns.

## **2. Has the growing use of social media and communications platforms encouraged poor body image?**

Social media can be understood as a form of attention economy or a visibility economy. In all media contexts, there are modes of attracting ‘eyeballs’ so that the media will be seen and consumed across older forms of media such as TV and print forms as well. Traditionally women’s bodies have been used to sell products as per the adage ‘sex sells’ across media platforms (Gill, 2007). Social media changes this

dynamic through increasing self-representation, because people produce their own images of themselves coined in the term 'selfie' (Senft and Bayme, 2015).

Selfies have been researched in the psychological literature as a process that can put youth at risk because it encourages young people to abide by idealised body norms and appearance norms (Dobson, 2015). Psychological research has measured how failure to fit with these idealised norms has created forms of bodily dissatisfaction, and from this it is extrapolated that social media puts young people at risk.

This conclusion is problematic. It is not social media that is to blame for poor body image but rather the celebrated norms and ideals of beauty. Research shows that this is more of a production emanating from the global capitalist beauty industry and fashion magazines and reality TV than something that is cultivated through youths' own representations of themselves. I would argue that each of these components play a part in how youth feel that they should put themselves online and how they manage pressures to have their images liked and approved by the peer group. Young people may produce their own images but the norms are still cultivated through mainstream beauty industry and capitalist practices like cosmetic surgery which capitalise on people's insecurity and feeling they don't fit to say that altering their body will fix these problems.

### **3. What is the link between sexting and body dissatisfaction?**

Sexting is a way of discussing sexually explicit imagery that is shared or distributed amongst young people. The main legal issue in sexting is whether the image is of a body that is below the age of consent for distribution of nude images which is 16 in the UK.

Body dissatisfaction arises in part from bias around pressures around how people feel they should represent themselves and one of the main ways this happens nowadays is on social media. Sexting is the exchange of sexually explicit content and/or images. International research findings show that there is greater pressure upon girls to provide nude images of their bodies to boys as part of intimate and dating rituals now a normal part of youth culture (Kosenko et al., 2017). With the expectations about sharing images of the nude body are associations of what this body should look like. Girls in my research have reported that they have felt pressure to 'look like a porn star', which may negatively affect not only their body image but their confidence around their sexuality and desirability as a girl or young woman (Ringrose et al., 2013). However, not only does this relate to body dissatisfaction but to more general issues of girl's self-esteem. If girls feel pressured to be highly valued as sexual objects this can take away from their feelings of value and worth in other domains. Our findings show that is related to class culture as well. Since if girls associate their body as a primary means to generate value and income they will be under more pressure to represent themselves specific ways.

Boys also face pressure around their self-images and representations online. In contrast to girls, boys may feel pressure to appear more sexually competent and experienced sexually as part of gaining 'ratings' and reward. We had boys that felt

pressure to post pictures of their muscles and to present themselves as ‘players’ sexually in ways that may be disingenuous.

Sexting is a legal issue. It is illegal for images of YP under 18 to be distributed in the UK. The non-consensual passing or distributing and posting of any nude images is also illegal. This is a form of digitally facilitated sexual violence (DFSV, Henry and Powell, 2016), sometimes called revenge porn. The illegal collection and distribution and posting of (primarily girls and women’s) bodies is what needs to be tackled through educating young people about their legal rights and responsibilities, including digital rights (Livingstone et al., 2017). The sharing or posting images of bodies non-consensually is a form of sexual harassment and violence, and these coercive practices relate to oppressive norms of femininity and masculinity: that girls should be sexually attractive to boys and do anything to get that and boys should act in a sexually predatory fashion and also increase their esteem through girls body images (Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013). Images of girls’ and women’s bodies become a form of currency or money. Girls are also subject to sexual double standards where sexual images of their bodies are shamed as ‘slutty’ in peer and popular culture, where boy’s images are not subject to the same shaming. This is a sexual double standard. This idea that girls should be ashamed of their sexual images is perpetuated in England in the CEOP youth sexting film EXPOSED. The film shames a girl who is harassed and bullied because her boyfriend’s friend posts her images onto a group exposure page, but the film never explores the roles of the boys involved (see Dobson and Ringrose, 2015). Myself and colleagues internationally have fought to have sexist and slut shaming sexting education films replaced by new curriculum (Albury, 2013; Karaian, 2013; Ringrose and Dobson and Ringrose, 2015).

In our research on sexting girls felt there was silence and secrecy around sexual harassment and were afraid of being labelled ‘snitches’ or ‘snakes’ if they spoke to adults. Young people uniformly asked for more support at school (Ringrose et al., 2012). For example, girls, may feel pressure to be popular online and cultivate a certain image around peer expectations and likes (which is called the ‘like economy in social media research’). We found this in our research when a 14 year old girl had over 10,000 Instagram followers and who competed with her friend for the most followers. She also used these connections for dating had they enabled her to locate and date boys from a higher economic standing (a more elite school) in her neighbourhood (These and the following examples are from Renold et al. forthcoming).

Girls can also feel under pressure to perform and post online and worry about the reception of the images they post which can be subject to online heterosexual harassment (see also Steeves and Bailey, 2015).

Emmy: They just put horrible things on these accounts and take pictures just say like...

Colleen: Screenshots.

Heidi: Screenshots of like bad pic....like slips like bad pictures of themselves and....

Colleen: And like people's nude pictures....

Emmy: Yeah someone's nude pictures got posted.

Heidi: Sex whatever you want to call it.

Emmy: Yeah that got posted and they were just rude about people like....

(14 years old)

Girls were particularly worried about how 'nude pictures' could be 'leaked' without consent and the invasion of girls' privacy:

I know that Instagram isn't safe because I've seen like nude pictures get leaked of people from other schools around (area of) London and I can't imagine what they'd be feeling. I mean, their privacy has been completely invaded, all of their friends, some of their family would have seen it because they'd been tagged, how can you go through that and still go through day to day life like that, it doesn't make sense?

(Alex, aged 14)

Some boys didn't recognize this as heterosexual harassment:

Amar: I think that um, girls...need to think about what they're going to do, 'cos when they do send nudes, they don't think about the consequences

Saeed: (but) it wouldn't have happened if the boy didn't ask for it (...) but I think then it comes up to the girl who has to decide, and maybe she doesn't feel confident in herself. Maybe she, er, is having trouble and she doesn't feel as though she has the confidence to say no

(14 years old)

We see although distributing sexually explicit images without consent is a form of sexual harassment and a sexual offence on the part of the sender, the boys focus blame instead on girls as the producers of the images - judging them as failing 'to think' about the consequences of making the images and for lacking the confidence to 'say no' to boys' requests This is a form of victim blaming that stems from wider rape culture and acceptance of masculine sexual violence as normal. It is critical to underscore here that the sexual harassment and sexual double standards and victim blaming of girls in relation to sexting is what may cause the poor self-esteem because of the reception of their images. Girls are subject to varying levels of sexual

shaming (slut shaming) and policing around their clothes, bodies and appearance online, which then may relate to feelings of anxiety and stress about their bodies (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015).

Boys also felt pressure to post images that conveyed swagger through brands and depictions of wealth (Harvey et al., 2015) and they felt great pressure to participate in cultures of aggressive masculinity:

Johnny, 15, London: If they had a picture of a girl naked and you told them 'That's wrong' they will think straight away you are gay.

#### **4. Can the internet and social media be used as a tool to promote positive self-image? What examples are there of this happening?**

Increasingly social media is a place for young people to learn about gender and sexuality. Online sites and social media provide important opportunities for learning about gender and sexuality which are not available on the school curriculum. Young people learn about support services but also issues of gender and sexual diversity from sites such as Snapchat and Tumblr, and they generally view social media like Tumblr as a safe space to get information (Albury and Byron, 2016; Warfield, 2016). These spaces and forums also provide youth with the opportunity to find out about gender activism from campaigns around body positivity, to new forms of gender and sexual expression. In our research these spaces were very highly valued by young people. There are many examples of girls and women fighting back against body policing through body positivity movement - #CropTop Day where teens wore crop tops to fight sexualisation and body norms (see Keller, Mendes and Ringrose, 2015).

Renold (2017, *The Conversation*) has documented how, over the last decade young people have been leading the way on a vast range of issues, from [skirt-length](#), [slut-shaming](#), [sexual consent](#), [female genital mutilation](#) and [misogynoir in the music industry](#), to [trans-rights](#), [inclusive sexuality education](#) and [why feminism should be on the school curriculum](#). Knowingly or unknowingly supported by a rich history of [feminist+ movements and legacies](#), young people are making their own distinctive ripples and waves to new and enduring [intersectional gender and sexual inequities](#) (*The Conversation*). These forms of activism have been documented in Emma Renold's work on *AGENDA: A young people's guide to making positive relationships matter* – a free resource that is available to all schools and youth groups in Wales to support young people to creatively address a range of issues, including the pressures of gender normative body image and body cultures. One of the DIY activities, "Under Pressure" in *AGENDA* resource, encourages young people to work with a glitch-art app to film their body movements and explore and speak up about coercion and control (e.g. societal regulation of body norms, and body-shaming in relationships and friendships) (Renold 2016). Relating positively to bodies and body image through arts-based methods address but get beyond individualised programmes of critical media literacy (see also the innovative work by Clare Stanhope, 2017, Gender and Education Association Conference).

## **5. What examples are there of schools integrating the promotion of positive body image into school subjects across the curriculum particularly physical education? How successful have these been?**

The issue of schools addressing body image is complex and may arise in unexpected ways. Often schools create and sanction problematic policies around regulating gendered and racialized bodies which they don't recognize. For example, Victoria Showunmi (2017) has found in the UK that Black girls faced racism norms of embodiment around their school uniforms, which were designed to fit a white body and which made curvaceous and developed bodies stick out. School uniforms are an important area where certain bodies are viewed as normative, young and appropriately sexual and other bodies are not able to be accommodated. School uniforms which enforce a gender binary also present problems for transgender students if for instance there are expectations for girls to wear skirts. School uniforms may also neglect cultural and religious forms of dress and issues. Girls opting out of sporting activities or being excluded from sport activities that are associated with masculinity, such as premiere league football in the UK which is recognized as a sexist sport both in who can play at top levels and who can participate in the wider sporting culture and events. Muslim girls' participation in sport is a critical issue (McGee and Hardman, 2012)

### *Prioritizing Compulsory SRE*

Sex and relationship education has been made compulsory in England and the links between body image and sexuality need to be made clear in this curriculum. The current provision does not adequately address issues of mobile technology, social media and pressures facing youth around digital intimacy and dating and other issues.

### *Supporting Gender Activism including Feminist Groups and LGBT+ networks in School*

Many young people are challenging oppressive bodily norms through their gender activism in school around issues such as gender and sexual diversity and equality. For example, in my research on youth feminist groups at school we found that school based feminism groups provided young people developed their voice and confidence and felt able to stand up to issues of harassment both offline and online and to communicate their views to a wider audience via their uses of social media (Ringrose and Renold, 2016; Keller et al, 2016). Here are young people reflecting on the experience of having a feminist club at school:

Joanna: it gave you like a place to go with your problems, like before if someone shouted at you in the street you would have been like there's nothing I can do but now there's a place to go and talk about it and suggest things to stop it... (Year 9 and 10 girls, Focus Group)

Anna: I feel like, especially through year 8 I always felt like I was isolated in holding feminist views so in the class room I'd say something and people would say like here she goes, and I think that made me think Stella's the only one who's a feminist but now I think not really as there's a whole classroom of people who are interested in feminism and it's nice to not feel so alone in your views (Year 11 Girls, Focus Group 4)

Jos: yeah cos when we were 13 we didn't have any of that and I think what's nice about the group now is that there's something here now where girls can talk about their experiences and be in a safe environment to talk about it and share their views, and I think especially when we were in year 8 and things were happening like sexism, touching and catcalling we were like 12 or 13 (Year 11 Girls, Focus Group 5)

Stella: I think when we had the first meeting ...we just said what feminism is and talked about the ideology but also how it can be utilised. So we made a leaflet and broke it down... There was one boy who was in my science class that I'd always have these discussions with, he'd be like feminism is pathetic, feminism is stupid and then like coming to this group, there was a leaflet that Sir (Mr. Hanson) gave out that explained what a feminist is and the importance of it and the statistics about experiences girls had had, and I gave him the leaflet and he took it home and came in the next day and he was like do you know what Stella, I've got something to tell you that's quite important and he was like I would now declare myself a feminist (Stella year 11, Focus Group 5)

Another example comes from the AGENDA resource, the #WAM project in Wales led a flashmob dance, followed up by a silent protest to address the impact of girls' pressure to wear 'make-up'. This protest enabled girls to explore the contradictory desire for and struggle with the tyranny of make-up, and raised awareness of 'make-up' as a gendered/classed/raced feminist issue.

My latest research (Ringrose, forthcoming) explores how schools can support gender and sexual equity through looking at issues of sexual harassment and homophobia together (see Pascoe, 2016). I am exploring experiences of school LGBT+ networks and clubs. These clubs are providing safe spaces for young people to discuss and share experiences and to work with teachers to create inclusion and respect at school.

### **Recommendations for Department for Education to support schools:**

- Schools must prioritize media literacy around the gender class, race and sexuality pressures of engaging with social media that help young people to feel better equipped to fight back against performative pressures about their bodies and appearance.
- The new PSHE curriculum must make the links between body image, gender health, well-being and sexuality clear. The curriculum needs to address social pressures facing young people and how these can be combatted.
- School safety policies must prioritize new pressures around digital intimacy for young people including social media use and pornography. Technologically facilitated sexual harassment can relate strongly to issues of body image and self-esteem, cyberbullying policies should be connected to wider safety and health initiatives that tackle gender and sexism.
- Schools must support non-binary and gender fluid and trans youth who are at high risk of bullying and harassment. Many girls need support to not feel such a high value associated with their heterosexual desirability based on normative beauty ideals. Boys need support to withstand peer pressure around performing sexually aggressive masculinity in school and online. Some resources can be found in the Great Men initiative which works with

teen boys around issues of toxic masculinity.

- Schools must ensure curriculum, extracurricular activities and policies do not reproduce the gender binary and sexual double standards; and that sexism and homophobia are tackled head-on through a whole school approach. Core issues to be addressed include providing gender neutral uniforms and toilets, having a stringent policy on protected characteristics, including sexual harassment and homophobia.
- Schools need curriculum and policy about the positive pedagogical and learning uses of social media which prioritizes digital rights and media literacy – (see the new report from Third, Livingstone and Landsdown on children's digital rights)
- Schools can support the creation of youth-led change-making and awareness raising resources which foreground critical empowerment that enable young people to address and transform oppressive normative and commodified body image cultures. AGENDA (Wales) is one of the only resources in the UK that offers creative and collective solutions that get to the root of these harmful practices, and its use of creative methods enable young people to explore such sensitive issues.
- Schools need to support sport and art activity initiatives that take into consideration faith and cultural aspects of embodiment and work to empower all young people to participate. Physical activity campaigns (sport and dance) need to be culture and class sensitive, inclusive and welcoming.

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