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## Fighting the over-sexualisation of children

### Report<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

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### Summary

The over-sexualisation of children is a widespread phenomenon in the media, marketing campaigns, television programmes and consumer products. Through their perception by society and self-perception, it can have dramatic consequences on children's self-esteem, well-being, relationships and equal opportunities, and in the worst cases, be detrimental to their physical and mental health.

The Parliamentary Assembly should express its concern about the increasing trend of over-sexualisation of children and invite member States to strengthen their relevant legislation and policies, starting with in-depth studies and data collection on the issue. Activities by the media and advertising sector should be restricted by law and supervised by specialised bodies, while the development of ethical products should be encouraged. Targeted programmes should be developed to educate children at home and at school. Professionals in charge of child care and education should be specifically trained, and children themselves should be empowered to develop critical attitudes towards media content and become resilient to peer pressure, notably as concerns the sharing of sexualised images.

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1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 13777](#), Reference 4133 of 22 June 2015.



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## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. Mass media, marketing campaigns, television programmes and everyday products regularly “over-sexualise” children, particularly girls, by conveying images which portray women, men and in some cases even children, as sexual objects. Ease of access to unsuitable, pornographic, and even illegal content on the Internet threatens the innocence and privacy of children. The phenomenon of “sexting” (the sharing of sexually explicit images via mobile devices or other means on the Internet) has swept through Europe’s schools, often leading to significant psychological trauma. These are just a few examples of subtle and unsubtle sexual pressures that today’s children face in an over-sexualised environment.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly is very concerned about the over-sexualisation of children, which has a significant influence on their perception of society at large as well as on their own self-perception. The over-sexualisation of children can have a severe impact on their self-esteem, well-being, relationships, equal opportunities and achievements in school. In some cases, it can lead to sexual violence and be severely detrimental to their physical and mental health.
3. Action is needed urgently before these trends become further embedded in society and more children suffer from their detrimental consequences. Public authorities must develop effective legislation and implement policies and programmes to prevent the over-sexualisation of children; parents and teachers must be equipped to convey coherent messages to children to combat this phenomenon; the media and advertising sectors should be encouraged to change their approaches to marketing and legal restrictions should be imposed if need be.
4. In the light of the above, the Parliamentary Assembly urges member States to:
  - 4.1. gather scientific evidence through longitudinal studies on the effects of the inappropriate over-sexualisation of children, and particularly girls, by collecting data, in order to help define appropriate legislative and political measures, and by carrying out a review of the existing international literature on the over-sexualisation of children, in order to better understand the gravity of the phenomenon and the current state of knowledge in the scientific community;
  - 4.2. take legislative action to put limits on the inappropriate sexualised depiction of children in the media and advertising sectors, based amongst others on the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, “Lanzarote Convention”) and the guidelines contained in Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2013)1 on gender equality and media, whilst respecting the fundamental right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5);
  - 4.3. adopt policies and measures that seek to inform, educate and remind parents about the dangers that their children face in an over-sexualised environment (as well as to raise awareness of indicators of related distress or trauma), and equip parents to educate their children on these very sensitive issues in a constructive way;
  - 4.4. adopt policies which develop tools and information that provide guidance and support to schools and educational staff in protecting children from unwanted sexual attention and informing children about the realities of everyday pressure that they will face in schools, supporting the education that children receive from parents at home;
  - 4.5. provide specific training to professionals who are engaged in educating and caring for children; enabling them to convey constructive messages to children and open up trustful dialogue with them;
  - 4.6. set up effective media and advertising supervisory bodies to ensure the safeguarding of human dignity, and in particular the rights of children (where such bodies are not already in existence), and ensure that accessible and effective complaints mechanisms are in place;
  - 4.7. encourage the media and advertising sectors to safeguard the dignity and innocence of children in their productions, through self-regulatory mechanisms, internal codes of conduct and other voluntary action, and educate these sectors on the impact of overtly sexual content on children;
  - 4.8. promote and support public policies, agencies, strategies and tools aimed at raising children’s and young people’s awareness of inappropriate over-sexualisation and empowering them to resist such trends by supporting approaches and structures (such as Safer Internet Centres and helplines) and involve children in the conception and design of tools and messages;

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2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 2 June 2016.

4.9. support the education children receive from their parents at home by promoting programmes for children that highlight the dangers of an over-sexualised society and that:

4.9.1. are provided at home and in schools (primary and secondary), but also via social networks, in an age-appropriate manner;

4.9.2. include information about respect for one's own privacy and respect for others;

4.9.3. empower children to develop critical attitudes towards media contents, and increase children's resilience to peer pressure, thus reducing the harmful consequences of sexualised images;

## **B. Draft recommendation<sup>3</sup>**

1. Referring to its Resolution ... (2016) on fighting the over-sexualisation of children, the Parliamentary Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to ensure that the issue is addressed within the programme "Building a Europe for and with Children" and in particular the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021), as well as in the work programmes of other relevant Council of Europe bodies.
2. More specifically, the Assembly invites the Committee of Ministers to:
  - 2.1. transmit the said resolution to the governments of member States;
  - 2.2. invite the new Ad hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child (CAHENF) to take into account the recommendations presented in the said Resolution ... (2016), and to develop a specific activity aimed at fighting the over-sexualisation of children, as well as to support targeted activities carried out by other bodies of the Council of Europe in a transversal manner;
  - 2.3. as regards the activities of other Council of Europe bodies:
    - 2.3.1. ask the Gender Equality Commission (GEC) to develop new standards specifically aimed at fighting the over-sexualisation of children;
    - 2.3.2. ask the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) to put a stronger emphasis on the protection of children, in the context of its activities on human rights for Internet users.

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3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 2 June 2016.

## **C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Valeriu Ghiletschi, rapporteur**

### **1. Introduction**

1. Children's rights and the protection of children against sexual violence in various forms have been a priority for the Parliamentary Assembly and especially the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development for many years. Amongst the topical areas of concern is the increasing trend of "over-sexualisation" of children in modern society, in particular in the media (television, Internet, social media), marketing campaigns and related industries, notably by exposing children to content that is not appropriate.

2. Based on the most valuable contribution from a European expert, Ms Nadine Schirtz from the National Youth Service of Luxembourg, the present report gives an overview of the issue. As rapporteur, I notably wish to highlight the different forms, facets, causes and consequences of the over-sexualisation or inappropriate sexualisation of children, before proposing action to be taken by different players. In doing so, I am drawing upon the expert information memorandum without citing all individual sources used; only new sources are explicitly mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

3. What are the main concerns about the over-sexualisation of children? What appears, at first glance, as a very specific topic, is in fact a complex phenomenon of concern to us all: the sexualised presentation of men, women, and even children, in the media influences our perception of girls and women, and may in the long run have an influence on their social status and their well-being. Sexualised images of children and notably girls may also be closely connected to various forms of sexual violence, such as child abuse images, and may in some cases be a factor leading to sexual abuse. Policy responses are therefore needed urgently and at many levels.

4. Whilst the European institutions need to send out the right political messages and develop standards, national parliaments need to strengthen relevant legislation defining limits for the production, use and distribution of sexualised images and governments need to remind parents of their role in protecting their children from over-sexualisation, and to develop targeted policies to support parents and safeguard the innocence and dignity of children. Next to action taken by the central authorities, I would also like to promote the role of institutions involved in the education and care of children, as well as that of the family and children's and young people's peers.

5. All those in contact with children, in charge of producing and conveying child images, or of supervising such activities should be made aware of dangerous content conveyed through the media, of the means for preventing it, of alternatives to sexualisation and healthier ways of depicting children, and of measures making children resilient to the seduction of sexualised images giving them the illusion of behaving in an adult manner.

### **2. The driving forces behind sexualisation: expressions, causes and consequences**

6. The way in which we perceive ourselves as men and women is defined by biology and gender-specific characteristics conveyed through family values, education and the social environment. In this social environment, different kinds of media are strong players for all of us, including for our children. The sexualisation of children happens in everyday life, in the media, in advertising campaigns, through industrial and consumer products, and often in a manner which is not age appropriate, thus as "over-sexualisation". Following this understanding, the notions of sexualisation and over-sexualisation may sometimes be used in a synonymous manner in the present report.

#### **2.1. Expressions and causes of children's sexualisation**

7. Children and especially young girls wearing pretty clothes and make-up and teenagers dressing like grown-ups, are just some of the visible expressions of children's early sexualisation. Children want to be like their idols they have seen on television, in magazines or in advertisements. However, sexualisation, thus the reduction of children to their gender-related and sexual features, or the overemphasising of such features, must not be confounded with early sexual behaviour. The sexualisation or even "objectification" of children is driven by adult imagination and is imposed on children before they are even capable of fully understanding or dealing with it.

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4. The information memorandum prepared by the expert can be found in document AS/Soc/Inf (2016) 04, available from the committee Secretariat upon request.

8. What are the reasons for depicting children in a sexualised manner? Many marketing concepts are based on the assumption that “sex sells” and that people are more receptive to messages when they are in an emotionally excited state. Playing with “sexy” images often gives a product more attention from its potential buyers. Adolescent boys and girls are an important target group for fashion, beauty and lifestyle products, usually supported by their parents’ spending power. Even in the younger age range of 8 to 12, children are important consumers as they remain interested both in children’s toys and teenage and grown-up products.

9. Sexualisation predominantly affects girls who are more often than boys depicted in a sexualised manner in media and advertising campaigns. However, boys are clearly concerned as well if only because they too are reduced to their looks and gender-related qualities. Any depiction of persons according to sexual features is inevitably a gender subject and therefore affects both sexes. The sexualisation of girls thus also influences the way in which they are perceived by boys.

10. Why are children so sensitive to role models? According to the German “KIM-study”, two thirds of 6 to 13 year-olds are fond of an individual person or group. In 38% of the cases, these come from film or television. One in five children mention a person from the music industry they admire. However, girls (73%) are more likely to have an idol from the pop culture scene than boys (41%) who mostly find their idols in sports (44% compared to the 5% of girls).

11. In the phase of identity-building, people with a strong public presence often serve children as a projection screen for their own future plans and dreams. Children’s “adoration” of movie and pop stars might have an influence on how they see themselves and want to be seen by others. This fantasy becomes even more reachable with the new television formats: casting shows for teenage models, singers or actors convey a tempting but treacherous message of “you can be one of us” to our children.

12. Why is the role of the media and the media industry so crucial when it comes to preventing the over-sexualisation of children? From an early age, children are the first media users: 92% of all European Union households with dependent children have access to a computer and 80% of young people (16-29) use a computer on a daily basis in 2014.<sup>5</sup> Even younger children have their own social media profile (20% of 8 to 11 year-olds and 70% of 12 to 15 year-olds) – whilst the amount of time children spend online has more than doubled, from 4.4 hours a week in 2005 to 11.1 hours in 2015 for 8 to 11s and from 8 hours to 18.9 for 12 to 15s.<sup>6</sup>

13. Member States should control this situation by forbidding the publication of sexual messages in any child-accessible media and, on the contrary, by promoting positive messages of holistic self-development, addressed to children and respectful of their human dignity and every philosophical and religious tradition.

## **2.2. Mechanisms and consequences of sexualisation**

14. The increasing sexualisation of children and their definition as sexual beings in the media, marketing campaigns and consumer products leads us all into subconsciously accepting such concepts and images as social norms. Children themselves, imitating adult behaviour without any reflection, often accept these norms and try to live up to the expectations forced upon them.

15. Sexualised messages, including sexist publicity and adult roles imposed on children, are often received sub-consciously. Consumers get used to them and do not pay attention anymore, whilst in some cases even giving in to such models, for example by dressing girls like little princesses. An 18-year-old girl having watched casting shows for many years, may consider that what she sees on the screen is normal life and the way to be.

16. In the end, we are all under the subconscious influence of stereotypes, for example by valuing young women for their attractiveness rather than their intellectual or social contributions to society. Researchers have found that even brief contacts with sexualised representations of women and men are sufficient for the viewer to think that a person is less competent thus less likely to have good professional skills. Wherever applied in a real life context, such mechanisms can have a dramatic effect on children’s and young people’s further development through the way in which they are perceived by others.

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5. “Being young in Europe today – digital world”, data extracted in March 2015: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being\\_young\\_in\\_Europe\\_today\\_-\\_digital\\_world](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_digital_world).

6. According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the United Kingdom; see: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/online-abuse/facts-statistics/> and Ofcom (Independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries) study of November 2015: [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/children-parents-nov-15/childrens\\_parents\\_nov2015.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/children-parents-nov-15/childrens_parents_nov2015.pdf).

17. Another consequence of the permanent sexualisation of children is the influence on children's self-perception and self-esteem. Bombarded by the beauty and fashion industry as well as by mainstream media, being sexually attractive becomes a priority for many teenagers. This allows industry and marketing campaigns to affect children via their weak body image. A campaign in the United Kingdom ("Be real") aimed at promoting body confidence found that a third of children often worry about the way they look, which is also the largest cause of bullying in school.

18. For individual children, the vicious circle and "self-fulfilling prophecy" consists in increasingly lowering their self-esteem where they do not comply with the norm spread by their favourite media. Their attempt to comply with beauty standards, an exaggerated interest in fashion and beauty products or even problematic or disordered eating behaviours (for example anorexia or bulimia) are just the tip of the iceberg. Many more children suffer from low self-esteem, self-doubt or negative body awareness – frequent phenomena in teenage years and phases of adolescent identity-building – without showing it. Finally, the anchorage of sexualised images as a social norm can have most dramatic consequences for children's lives: many girls facing the above problems have made suicide attempts.

19. Independent of trends observed in the media environment, the (sexual) behaviour of young girls has changed over the past decades, and so has the age when they reach puberty, which is certainly another factor for changes in their self-perception and sensitivity to sexualised images. Different studies prove that girls in the United States and Europe reach puberty earlier than previous generations. Amongst the reasons for this, researchers see changed hormonal patterns (due to obesity, hormones in food, chemical toxins, etc.) and more exposure to unrelated male figures such as stepfathers or boyfriends.

20. As experts report, nowadays many children in their teens see sex as a prerequisite to an intimate relationship, rather than a consequence of intimacy. Sexual activity is considered safe, like holding hands, and no longer considered an intimate act. Teenagers will openly talk about sex in public, not caring about who is listening. This attitude becomes visible in the phenomenon of "sexting", that is to say the sharing of intimate pictures and messages via Internet and smartphones. Children across Europe are found to be getting involved in such activities in a very naïve manner, and many nude pictures find their way into the public sphere, very often against the will of the person depicted. Some countries even report an increasing number of teenagers willing to prostitute themselves, either to finance their consumption of cigarettes, alcohol or drugs or to buy beauty or fashion products, or even to finance their studies if their families are not in a position to do so.

21. Finally, another risk is that messages sent out to children are not coherent. While parents and other carers across Europe teach children about their right to gender equality, women's rights, self-awareness, self-esteem and a life free from violence, the messages children receive via the media are full of hero men, submissive women and, very often, violent relationships. For children, this results in attitudes where they would fully agree that you should not judge people by their looks, but still feel the pressure to comply with certain stereotypes.

22. Double standards have also recently been noted by American researchers, who have found that social media amplify the self-awareness of young girls. Whilst being a teenager has never been easy, charm, looks and popularity have now become readily quantifiable and mistakes easier to spot than ever before. For many girls, the constant seeking of "likes" and attention on social media feels like being a contestant in a never-ending beauty contest focussing disproportionately on appearance and leading to competition and bullying. Whilst some would respond that the voluntary "objectification" of girls is a sign of their sexual empowerment, others rightly criticise the fact that most pornography tends to present female sexuality as something that primarily exists to the benefit of men.<sup>7</sup> Such incoherence needs to be tackled urgently through measures at various levels. Our societies need to create an everyday environment, including a media environment, facilitating children's development.

### **3. Multiple responses to counter the over-sexualisation of children**

23. As mentioned above, the sexualisation of children by our societies is not just related to the media or publicity. It is a larger societal trend of concern to us all. Responses are therefore needed from parents first, law and policy makers, industrial players, the advertising sector, the media at large, Internet providers and publishers, but also any person in charge of educating or caring for children, including teachers and families.

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7. "Two steps forward, one back" – Girls and Sex, *The Economist*, 2 April 2016.

Finally, children themselves need to be made aware of the risks of over-sexualisation and be empowered to become and remain independent of such trends and threats. This must be done without making children feel guilty and without delegating to them the fundamental responsibilities of parents and educators.

### **3.1. European standards and recommendations**

24. The Council of Europe has been very active in setting and implementing child protection and children's rights standards for many years, notably under its programme "Building a Europe for and with Children" and its subsequent "Strategies for the Rights of the Child", the latest of which covers the period 2016 to 2021 and was launched in Sofia in April 2016. Although fighting the over-sexualisation of children could certainly still be addressed more explicitly, the Council of Europe has developed interesting activities more or less directly related to this field.

25. Certain Council of Europe texts contain useful elements regarding media literacy and media supervisory mechanisms, in particular Committee of Ministers Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2013\)1](#) on gender equality and media adopted in June 2013. Some of the most interesting measures suggested therein also seem to apply to the oversexualisation of children, for example:

- Encourage media organisations to adopt self-regulatory measures, internal codes of conduct/ethics and internal supervision, and develop standards in media coverage that promotes gender equality in order to promote a consistent internal policy aimed at a non-stereotyped image, role and visibility of women and men, avoidance of sexist advertising, language and content which could lead to discrimination on grounds of sex, incitement to hatred and gender-based violence;
- Encourage the media to provide information to the public in a clear way (online for example) on the complaints procedure in relation to media content, support and promote good practices through the development of networks and partnerships and encourage non-governmental organisations, media associations, individuals and other relevant stakeholders to bring their concerns to self-regulatory bodies or other specialised bodies;
- Promote gender sensitive media literacy for the young generation, prepare young people to approach different forms of media content responsibly and enable them to acquire a critical view of media representations of gender and to decode sexist stereotypes; enhance the gender equality perspective in the media literacy programmes for young people of different ages as a factor for broad human rights education and active involvement in the democratic processes.

26. The Parliamentary Assembly, for its part, had certainly prepared the grounds for this recommendation notably through [Resolution 1557 \(2007\)](#) and [Recommendation 1799 \(2007\)](#) on the image of women in advertising. Especially in the latter, the Assembly called on the Committee of Ministers to "draw up a European code of good conduct encouraging advertising professionals to present images which are not discriminatory and respect the dignity of women and men". Similar lines could be followed when it comes to calling for action against the over-sexualisation of children. Further relevant elements can also be found in [Resolution 2001 \(2014\)](#) and [Recommendation 2048 \(2014\)](#) on violence in and through the media.

27. Similar standards could be developed on protecting children against over-sexualisation by the competent standard-setting bodies of the Council of Europe, for example through the Gender Equality Commission (GEC), where the above Recommendation CM/Rec(2013)1 was drafted.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.2. Possible legislative action at the national level**

28. Implementing European standards at the national level always leads us to examine possible legislative action first. Examining the full range of possible legal action to be taken against over-sexualisation in detail here would exceed the scope of this report. However, it may be said that, legally, the issue could be tackled from different angles, including the prohibition of illegal child abuse images (previously often called child pornography) and the prohibition of online grooming, which is considered to be an illegal act in the framework of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, "Lanzarote Convention") (even if not followed by an actual physical act of sexual abuse).

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8. For further information on this Commission and its activities, see: [www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/genderequality-commission](http://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/genderequality-commission).

29. Legislative action could also refer to different social contexts in which sexualised images of children are conveyed, such as beauty contests for children. A positive example of this is the French legislation passed in January 2014 to prohibit beauty contests for girls under 13 (“mini-miss”) and to require prior authorisation for contests involving girls aged 13 to 16.<sup>9</sup>

30. Legal action against over-sexualised images of children as such is not as easy to take, because most images we are speaking of here are produced with children’s consent or even by children themselves. Pictures exchanged between children and their peers via social networks and smartphones go widely unnoticed by adults. The issue will mostly have to be tackled by re-defining ethical standards and finding new agreements on what is harmful for children; this is a huge cultural challenge. Not forgetting that any legal action taken needs to respect the right to freedom of expression.

### **3.3. Guidance for families, teachers and carers**

31. In order to protect children from becoming victims of over-sexualisation, they need to be educated about it. In the digital world we are living in, education needs to involve media literacy and open communication about problems and risks that may be caused by the media or exist in a media environment.<sup>10</sup> For me as rapporteur, but also as a politician and father, this must involve both the development of positive media skills to allow children and young people to live up to their full potential, but also the promotion of critical attitudes towards problematic media formats and contents.

32. As already described above, in the modern world, the media influence to a great extent what is being perceived and accepted as a normal standard; they define ideal body images and social behaviour. The younger a child, the easier he or she can be influenced by media messages. Sexualised children, that is to say children depicted in a sexualised manner, perform roles which they cannot yet fully understand.

33. The approach to sexuality and relationship education is very different from one European country to another and even within a country, depending on school guidelines and the impact of religion, philosophies and traditions. Unfortunately, while some families are educating their children about sexuality in an appropriate and sensitive way, many are failing to do so as they see sexuality education as a task to be carried out by schools, thus obliging their children to self-educate on the Internet and leading to a distorted and confused understanding of sexuality.

34. If parents are unable or unwilling to provide answers, children will turn to other sources, mostly the Internet, which provides a full range of video and photo material from sensible educational websites to hard-core pornographic movies. Keeping children away from computers or blocking access to media contents is only a temporary solution because curious children will find other means of accessing problematic contents or get access at their friends’ homes. Children need to be educated about their dignity and worth so that they feel less pressure to conform to sexualised stereotypes.

35. Parents are best placed to help children understand their own sexuality. The simple statement “Pornography is not the depiction of real sex, but pure fiction played by actors” can make a huge difference!

### **3.4. Empowering and supporting children**

36. The development of information and communication technologies has accelerated children’s sexualisation, and changed the way in which they perceive their bodies and approach sexuality. The key tool for empowering children and young people to resist the pressure and influence of sexualised images is strong education starting in the home, thus helping children to understand the pressures they are submitted to in today’s society

37. Whatever the origin and context of delivery of such programmes, they should contain sexual and non-sexual elements (“life skills”), foster the self-awareness and self-esteem of children, promote positive body images (rather than questionable beauty standards) and help children develop critical attitudes towards the media as such and the contents conveyed.

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9. “Concours de ‘mini-miss’: l’Assemblée vote l’interdiction aux moins de 13 ans” (“‘Mini-miss’ contests: the Assembly votes for prohibition to those under 13”), *Libération/AFP*, 24 January 2014: [www.liberation.fr/societe/2014/01/24/concours-de-mini-miss-l-assemblee-vote-l-interdiction-aux-moins-de-13-ans\\_975314](http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2014/01/24/concours-de-mini-miss-l-assemblee-vote-l-interdiction-aux-moins-de-13-ans_975314).

10. Media literacy is generally defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication”, see: <https://namle.net/publications/media-literacy-definitions/>.

38. Through education tackling the issue in a transversal manner, led by parents, negative messages need to be turned into positive ones helping children to become strong and self-aware personalities. Children's behaviour is strongly influenced by what they observe around them, and particularly amongst those they believe to be similar to themselves. Children's peers are therefore important factors in any kind of education.

39. Promoting positive body awareness, images and attitudes can also protect children against the more severe consequences of over-sexualisation. Positive programmes can help avoid depression, eating disorders, as well as suicidal thoughts or attempts, for example by inciting children to practise sports, dance and music or outdoor activities in contact with nature; all activities which may seem less spectacular to modern children growing up in a digital environment but so much more valuable than passively looking good or "sexy". Children and young people who are used to sharing most intimate images and messages via social networks and mobile devices must learn (again) that their bodies are precious and private, that sharing intimate photos with a partner ("sexting") is not an ultimate proof of love and trust and that they are allowed to say no to sexual requests.

40. Practical tools useful for taking such messages to children and for protecting them have been developed and tested in different countries. Interesting examples include:

- Safer Internet Centres and Helplines which already exist in many European countries are organised in the pan-European network INSAFE and are considered centres of knowledge and excellence but also partners for any action initiated by public authorities;<sup>11</sup>
- awareness-raising and prevention campaigns or days; for example the "Zip it, Block it, Flag it" campaign developed in the United Kingdom as of 2011,<sup>12</sup> or the Safer Internet Day celebrated every year (most recently on 9 February 2016),<sup>13</sup>
- projects (campaigns, leaflets, etc.) which children have helped to design<sup>14</sup> by sharing opinions and experiences with regard to their behaviour in the digital environment;
- support tools enabling damages to be limited (wherever it is too late for prevention), such as the "damage control leaflet" developed by the UK Safer Internet Centre, meant to offer children, young people and parents advice and strategies to address the issues resulting from sexting incidents (without judging them).<sup>15</sup>

### **3.5. Engaging the producers**

41. Media, advertising and industrial companies also need to assume their responsibilities when it comes to the messages and products delivered to children and young people. As long as products are assumed to sell better through campaigns and programmes that use sexualised images, the situation is difficult to change. In an ideal world, media output would become self-regulatory in a way that is consistent with moral and ethical values shared by most; however, in practice this is not always the case, although some countries such as Germany have agencies for the "voluntary self-control" of film and television productions (beyond public control institutions).<sup>16</sup>

42. In the meantime, in a world where media and advertising companies do not always play along ethical lines, the role of the media and advertising ethics committees or audiovisual supervisory agencies is to keep an eye on the media landscape in order to intervene whenever human rights, including children's rights, are violated. In this context, children's rights should include the right not to be portrayed in sexualised ways and not to be carelessly exposed to inappropriate representations of sexuality without having the maturity required.

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11. See relevant information provided on the thematic webpages of the European Commission ("Digital Single Market"): <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/safer-internet-centres>.

12. For further information, see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8398763.stm>; [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121015000000/www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG\\_184971](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121015000000/www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG_184971).

13. See the dedicated website: <https://www.saferinternetday.org>.

14. In the substantial understanding provided by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx)) and as promoted by relevant Council of Europe standards, in particular Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18, adopted on 28 March 2012.

15. See the South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) in the United Kingdom: <http://swgfl.org.uk/products-services/esafety/resources/So-You-Got-Naked-Online>.

16. For information about the "media landscape" in Germany (and other countries via the relevant homepage), see: [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/germany](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/germany).

43. Examples for supervisory bodies are the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel* (CSA = Superior Audiovisual Council) in France, or the Independent regulator and competition authority for the communications industries (Ofcom) in the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Through supervisory mechanisms, players of the media and advertising sectors should also be held accountable. This means that Audio-visual supervisory mechanisms must include channels for complaints which will be taken seriously.

44. To encourage the social responsibility of media and advertising producers in particular and the creation of positive media content, certain incentives could be offered to them, for example through competitions financed by public authorities. Relevant guidelines and selection criteria could include the promotion of positive body images and the empowerment of children and young people to make their own, autonomous, decisions. Such approaches could become true models of non-formal education if they involved children and young people in production and conception processes.

45. A positive example for such competitions of relevance for the Assembly are the EACA (European Association of Communication Agencies) Care Awards, a prize which in 2015 was granted to the awareness-raising video "The Lake" produced by the Parliamentary Assembly (even though the thematic focus was more on sexual abuse, not over-sexualisation).<sup>18</sup> And once again, I would like to draw attention to a positive example amongst Council of Europe activities, namely the collection of papers on the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention") "Encouraging the participation of the private sector and the media in the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence: Article 17 of the Istanbul Convention".<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

46. The over-sexualisation of children, that is to say their sexualisation in a manner which is not age-appropriate, has many facets and finds various expressions in the media, in advertising and in industrial products. Following the behavioural examples of adults and peers, children tend to accept sexualised images and messages as a norm they will try to comply with. In a subtle manner, this may have a wide range of consequences for them, possibly affecting their self-awareness, self-esteem, well-being, equal opportunities, social status and development and even their health and safety.

47. The Assembly should express its concern about these trends, which severely affect children's human rights in various ways, not least to ensure that the issue is taken seriously by all parties concerned, and that messages sent out to children and young people are coherent. In the context highlighted here, children and young people are regularly told that beauty and looks are not everything, whilst being confronted daily with stereotyped images in the media.

48. In many cultural contexts, children are still confronted with family and community attitudes where sexuality and relationship education is a taboo, whilst being flooded with sexualised and even sexually explicit pictures in the media environment surrounding them. Our societies, in all their complexity, are facing the challenge of re-establishing coherence of values conveyed to the young generation and recognising both media and sexuality and relationship education as important elements of human rights education in modern societies.

49. Via its resolution and its recommendation, the Assembly should convey key recommendations with regard to action to be taken by national governments and other stakeholders in member States of the Council of Europe, as well as the Council of Europe as such with a view to establishing frameworks and guidelines for coherent action. This should notably include:

- measures aimed at empowering families to communicate openly with their children about sexuality and relationship matters;
- legislative action to define the limits for the sexualised depiction of children, and notably girls, in the media, in the advertising sector and in events where children participate, whilst respecting the fundamental right to freedom of expression;

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17. For information on CSA, see: [www.csa.fr/Espace-Presse/Interventions-publiques/Autorites-de-regulation-medias-audiovisuels-et-developpement-social-et-culturel](http://www.csa.fr/Espace-Presse/Interventions-publiques/Autorites-de-regulation-medias-audiovisuels-et-developpement-social-et-culturel); for information on Ofcom, see: [www.ofcom.org.uk](http://www.ofcom.org.uk).

18. For information on the prize-winning video, see: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=5692&lang=2&cat=133>, and for the award as such: [www.careawards.eu](http://www.careawards.eu).

19. See the full publication under: Gender Equality and the Media at National Level, Compilation of good practices from member States, Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission (GEC), Strasbourg, July 2014: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/sso/SSODisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680590557>.

- setting up supervisory institutions and procedures, encouraging ethical behaviour of the media and offering effective complaint mechanisms;
- public policies and tools aimed at raising the awareness of children and young people to the issue supporting approaches where children participate in the conception and design of tools and messages;
- media literacy conveyed in an age-appropriate manner, aimed at strengthening positive body images and autonomy;
- measures aimed at empowering children to say no to inappropriate and dangerous behaviour (for example sharing intimate images via social media).