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NZ Cabinet Ministers Called to Tackle the Sexualisation of Childhood with Aussie Counter-parts

According to the National Council of Women of New Zealand the current meeting of New Zealand and Australian leadership provides a ready-made forum for raising the concern of trans-tasman exporting of offensive, sexualising products for children.

Perhaps New Zealand consumers would not have needed to boycott Cotton On products had Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd called for rapid implementation of recommendations following the Australian Senate *Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media*.

“While the Senate recommendations made in mid-2008 were seen as significantly diluted from what was put forward via submissions,” says Elizabeth Bang, NCWNZ National President, “they would have acted as a deterrent at the very least to businesses, like Cotton On, seeking to make profit from sexualising childhood and generating brand recognition.”

The submission to the Inquiry from the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, an entity similar to the New Zealand Children’s Commission, captured the very essence of the problem currently faced by Kiwi parents:

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, Victoria, has been concerned about the sale of children’s clothing and underwear displaying sexually suggestive slogans. Given that some of this clothing is available for toddlers who cannot even read the messages and that the messages suggest sexual availability and character traits not attributable to, or desirable for children, it is clear that the ‘beneficiaries’ of this clothing are adults.

One of the several recommendations made by this Commission to the Senate Inquiry included improvements to Advertising codes administered by the Australian Advertising Standards Bureau.

NCWNZ was of the belief that New Zealand had such protection in place already, and so questioned the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in relation to sexually suggestive slogans on children’s clothing.

However, according to a representative from ASA, not all slogans can be classified as advertising and are therefore not covered by the existing codes:

“the slogans described, while clearly likely to create serious and widespread offence, do not in my mind “promote an interest of any person, product or service, impart information, educate, advocate an idea, belief, political viewpoint or opportunity”.

“This means that as it currently stands in New Zealand, we are not properly protected from the sexualisation of childhood,” says Elizabeth Bang. “This needs to change”.

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“Women Influencing Policy”

Letter to ASA regarding offensive slogans on t-shirts

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is concerned by the prominence of offensive and sexual slogans being printed on children's clothing and is enquiring as to whether the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has captured this issue in the existing code.

T-shirts and other items of clothing have been used for the purposes of advertising for some years now. What codes exist to govern this medium and ensure that social responsibility is upheld in regards to what is considered appropriate?

NCWNZ has launched a campaign against Cotton On in regards to their line of baby wear that carries slogans such as, 'I'm bringing sexy back', 'So hot right now', 'Practice safe sucks', 'I'm a tits man', 'The condom broke', 'I'm living proof my mum is easy' and 'Mummy likes it on top'.

NCWNZ is an umbrella organisation representing 50 nationally organised societies and national members. It has 26 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies as well as individual members. The Council's function is to serve women, families and the community at local, national and international levels through research, study, discussion and action.

As NCWNZ understands it, the definition of advertising for the purposes of the ASA Codes would include slogans on t-shirts as these impart information and advocate an idea.

*"The word "advertisement" is to be taken in its broadest sense to embrace any form of advertising and includes advertising which promotes the interest of any person, product or service, **imparts information, educates, or advocates an idea, belief, political viewpoint or opportunity.**"*

Within the ASA Code of Ethics there are two rules that apply to the Cotton On slogans:

4. *Decency - Advertisements should not contain anything which clearly offends against generally prevailing community standards taking into account the context, medium, audience and product (including services).*
5. *Offensiveness - Advertisements should not contain anything which in the light of generally prevailing community standards is likely to cause serious or widespread offence taking into account the context, medium, audience and product (including services).*

NCWNZ and many other organisations and individuals have spoken out against this line of baby wear being sold at Cotton On, because we believe these slogans offend against generally prevailing community standards and cause serious offence.

Although the slogans may seem humorous to some adults, the sexual nature of the slogans is completely inappropriate when associated with babies and children. These slogans are in breach of Principle 2 of the ASA Code for Advertising to Children and Article 3 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states, "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration".

Principle 2 - Advertisements should observe a high standard of social responsibility.

- 2(i) *Advertisements should not portray sexually suggestive images, or images that are degrading to any individual or group.*

The slogans also breach the ASA Code for People in Advertising, since they ridicule and sexualise the child, or the child's parents.

*2. Advertisements should not portray people in a manner which is reasonably likely to cause serious or widespread hostility, contempt, abuse or **ridicule**.*

5. Children must not be portrayed in a manner which treats them as objects of sexual appeal.

*6. Humour and satire are natural and accepted features of the relationship between individuals and groups within the community. Humorous and satirical treatment of people and groups of people is acceptable, provided that, taking into account generally prevailing community standards, the portrayal is not likely to cause serious or widespread offence, hostility, contempt, abuse or **ridicule**.*

Premature sexualisation, according to the Australian Institute, carries a range of risks for children and affects all aspects of their development. It can lead to:

- Compromised development of a healthy body image
- Eating disorders
- Compromised sexual and emotional development
- Potential normalising and encouragement of paedophilic sexual desire for children

The Advertising Standards Authority has been entrusted with the job of ensuring that advertising is 'socially responsible'.

"What is socially responsible in advertising depends on the context, medium, audience, product and prevailing community standards. One of the benefits of a principle and rule approach of the Advertising Codes of Practice is that the interpretation of the codes can move in response to what the community may find more or less acceptable."

The feedback and support that NCWNZ has received in relation to the campaign to remove the offensive t-shirts from the Cotton shelves, has shown that the current prevailing community standard finds that these slogans are not acceptable.

NCWNZ asks that the Advertising Standards Authority consider whether these slogans breach the ASA Codes and look into the consumer protection that exists around t-shirt slogans.