

Understanding Consent

Chanel Contos

Ebony Bennett [00:00:03] Can I everyone, I'm Ebony Bennett, deputy director at the Australia Institute, and welcome to our webinar series. Thanks so much for joining us this evening. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I live and work on Nundle and Nebris Country and pay my respects to elders past and present. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land. And of course, sovereignty was never stated. We do like to do these webinars, at least weekly, but dates and times do vary. Tonight, we're coming to you at five pm normally where in the morning. So thanks for joining us again. But just a reminder, for all our upcoming webinars and the details for those you can find, those at Australia Institute dot org dot a you. Coming up next week, we've got our regular chat with Katherine Murphy of The Guardian and Peter Lewis from Essential Media. That's pole position next Tuesday and then the week after that, a fortnight from now, we'll be talking to the former European commissioner for trade, Cecilia Malmström, and former European foreign correspondent for the ABC, Michael Brissenden, about a green recovery versus a gasified recovery. So that should be a really good one. Just a few tips before we begin this evening to help things run smoothly. If you hover over the bottom of your screen, you should be able to see a Q&A function where you can ask questions of our guest and upvote questions from other people and make comments on their questions as well. Please keep things both civil and on topic in the chat. We will boot you out. And finally, this is a live event and it's being recorded. And thanks again for joining us. I'm really excited about today's guest, Janelle Contos, shot to prominence in mid-February last year. Not that long ago when a poll she conducted on social media asking whether any of her friends who attended Sydney private schools at the time had been raped or sexually assaulted. And that pole went viral. It was the beginning of a campaign to ensure that all Australian students receive comprehensive sexual education. And much earlier, Chanel has begun to drive change across the Australian states in the forms of reforming the education when it comes to sexuality, sex and consent. She's also driving changes to legislation and resource reallocation, engaging and collaborating with school principals, with police, with parliamentary officials in several states. And she's been acting as a key contributor to the launch of New South Wales Police Operation Best, which is a sexual assault reporting system. Chanel is now a London based. She's a sexual assault activist, cheetah and a post graduate student currently undertaking a Masters. So it's not as if she doesn't have a lot on already. And she's doing that at the University College of London, which is where she's joining us from today. Thanks, Chanel. We really appreciate you joining us today.

Chanel Contos [00:02:57] Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to this conversation with you.

Ebony Bennett [00:03:00] Yeah. So obviously, it's been a massive year. I did just want to kind of ask you to take us back to that original poll that you posted that moment in time, kind of why you posted it and what that immediate kind of and visceral reaction was to it.

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Chanel Contos [00:03:19] Yes, sir, I post the poll in February this year, except actually last year in around May was when the idea started bubbling in my head. And this was because I was with friends who we were friends. We were young on the same social circle. We went to parties together, but went to different different independent schools around Sydney. And basically at the Superbowl, you know, we started having conversations and as people do when they spent a lot of time together. And in that conversation, two things happened. One, we opened up about our sexual assault experiences that happened while we were in high school. And two, I found out in that moment that the same boy who sexually assaulted me when I was 13 sexually assaulted another one of my mutual friends when she was 14. And this was insanelly distressing to me because I was thinking if he knew what consent was that, it wouldn't have happened to me in the first place. Or if I knew what consent was, I would have reported it and it wouldn't have happened to her anyway. So that's what I got to my. Your testimony is just about 10 or so from the people I was with and texting close friends that I knew how to experience sexual assault in high school. And then I kind of had as a carbon project and then ended up getting into my masters at UCL and kind of sidelined at the back of my mind, but wasn't as engaged with it. And then in February of this year, one of my close school friends who had also been sexually assaulted when we were young and I saw and stopped that rape, was really distressed. We were having like a moment we're sitting on the floor of my room and look down was very dramatic, crying. And it was just this frustration of this is almost 10 years later still experiencing trauma symptoms. And the boys probably completely unaware they ever did this to us because they wouldn't have adequately told what consent was which. Initially, the plan was to actually post the names of the boys, which, thank God, we did not do that in a bit of a like a thing of anger. And instead, my very rational flatmate advised that we made the poll a bit more broad and anonymous. And then I remember that I had all these testimonies backed up from the year before. And so I posted the Instagram post and the response was pretty instant and crazy.

Ebony Bennett [00:05:42] Yeah. And it kind of went viral and drew a lot of attention to it. And you ended up doing quite a bit of media. What was that like at the time to kind of do this little thing over here and then it just explodes in a different way?

Chanel Contos [00:05:57] Everybody was so intense that she had no idea that would ever happen. I've also never spoken to media at all before in my life. And then suddenly it was just like back to back interviews. I literally did not sleep for days in a house. I was pretty crazy. Yeah, I remember like being in bed five minutes before a Sky News interview and someone really got up. I'm I'm too tired. So, yeah, it just went crazy. But I just wanted to get the message out there as much as I could to as many people as I could. I wanted to be in conversation. I feel like it kept the momentum going because I felt people felt somehow that they were actually listening. It wasn't just going to Instagram and then going away after twenty four hours, it was getting media attention. And people who needed to be watching that were watching it. People like politicians, parents, teachers.

Ebony Bennett [00:06:45] Yeah, absolutely. And I guess one of the key things from all those testimonies was obviously the just how many young women it was happening to the similarity of those stories. Sometimes it was, you know, from strangers that they'd only met at a party. But other times people within a friendship group looking at all those testimonies and writing them must have been quite traumatic for you as well. But if you can just take us back, what stuck out to you when

you were just looking at that absolute flood of testimonies of of what had happened to two young women?

Chanel Contos [00:07:27] So the first I'd say a week or so is when the vast majority of testimonies came in and it was kind of just constant, if I wasn't doing maybe I was reading them and posting them. And just the thing that got me was just it's just the exact same. If it's if it's someone messaging, if someone submitted testimony from Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, we had such similar experiences. It's the same stories over and over again. It's you can pick out like four or five events that seem to just be the norm amongst early teen experiences. And yeah, what started out to me was the fact that collectively as a country, as thousands of girls, we this happen to us and we were just so unequipped with the tools to be able to articulate. Yeah, it was just the fact that it was so simple across across Australia and also I got some testimonies from the UK.

Ebony Bennett [00:08:31] Yeah, well, I'm so. Obviously, a lot of those testimonies were quite shocking and they did prompt a quick response from several schools, and then you go on into kind of your campaign to push for early education about consent in schools. What's the problem there? How big is that gap between when girls and and I guess some young men as well are experiencing these sexual assaults and when they're learning about consent within the curriculum?

Chanel Contos [00:09:09] So in Australia, currently concerned, education is not mandatory as a whole if your school does choose to teach consent. It comes in when you're around 16 years old, which is also the legal age of consent in Australia. Oh, in New South Wales, it varies slightly between different states and territories, but. Basically, by the time you're speaking to a room of your 10 to 12 students in Australia, 50 percent of them are already sexually active and they're hearing about consent for the first time at that age, which is so problematic because it's leaving out children so insanely unsafe. And even if we do bring that down a few years, it still needs to be brought down lower because we need to teach consent in an explicitly sexual way from a young age before students are having sex, because we believe that that 13 to 16 age gap is where students are insanely vulnerable to grooming, to boys a few years older than them, to not understanding how consent works in different situations, not knowing that you have to consent every single time with a boyfriend or a sexual partner. And then also concepts of consent in terms of just how to interact human to human sex aside, just boundaries and respect. You know, we need that to be brought in from primary school age so that by the time we add the layer of sexual consent, it just makes sense straightaway to these students.

Ebony Bennett [00:10:41] Yeah, and the testimony is obviously pretty heavily focussed on the experiences of young women. But what has been the reaction from young men that you've experienced or heard about?

Chanel Contos [00:10:54] So it's been a really interesting mix of reactions from young men. It's been overall really positive, is what I would say. I've had quite a lot of people message me or submit

testimonies, especially young men who are now adults. You know, that kind of early 20s range who are very openly reflective about their experiences in high school and the culture that they now say they were bystanders to or even again, just saying, like I I was uncomfortable with that, but I didn't even know how to explain that. I was uncomfortable about why until I was older and kind of got the opportunity to make new friends and expand horizons. But when you're in school, you're kind of in this just echo chamber and it's very dictated by a small group of people, kind of set the same in the culture. So there's been lots of reflection. There's been very high engagement from men, but there's also been a lot of young boys and men who have switched off this comment to my post. Or is that a quite misogynistic there's I know of examples of girls who have approached approached the rapists from high school and basically being like, you know, trying to take you to jail here. But I want an apology. And there's just been full denial, which is quite disappointing to hear. But you can also understand the way the justice system is currently set up, why they feel the needs to be the case. So there's been a mixed reaction, but I think overall quite positive. And there's also been lots of boys and young men who have submitted testimonies of sexual assault themselves and I think are also experiencing a breath of relief with this conversation being in public discourse, because it does reduce the taboo for them in a sense as well.

Ebony Bennett [00:12:43] Yeah, I wouldn't kind of go back to a point that you've made there. So the Australia Institute, a couple of years back, we did a poll around street harassment and experience of that and primarily obviously affects women, but primarily young women. And we found that overall the perpetrators were generally men targeting younger women while young women were alone and the perpetrator was also alone. So it was kind of an iceberg, essentially, where it was being experienced by a lot of women, but often completely, you know, while the perpetrator and the victim were alone. And so I think the results that we had shocked a lot of men who might not have witnessed it and so obviously didn't think it was happening that often. But obviously, women all have a story like that to relate. Do you think this has been like a similar phenomenon and that part of the reason why perhaps young women weren't coming forward about these stories was often the complications of that. It's not a stranger in some cases than it is people. They go to school with, people in their friendship group and things like that.

Chanel Contos [00:13:59] One hundred percent, I think it is. I get so many messages from boys especially I'm not sure about Instagram or anything, but I posted I posted this story a few days ago saying, what does your rapist do now and post the responses in the majority. My point was that these people who raped people in the ten years are usually funnel directly into positions of power for reasons I could talk about for hours. But so many yeah men messaged me saying, I'm shocked by this call. I believe this I never thought this would happen and, you know, that whole there's no incentive to lie when you're doing an anonymous survey or anything like that. And I think that's the thing. Not every single man has seen this type of violence being perpetrated or has done it themselves. But almost every single person who has ever experienced life as a woman has felt what it's like to be sexualised, sexually harassed, sexually assaulted. And sorry that I want to take over that you said as well as when you said it's usually a young young woman. It really disturbs me going into schools, speaking, speaking to children, literal children, 15, 16, 14 year old girls and talking about how sexual harassment is part of it every single day. Life by adult men, by grown men, by men who can drive cause you can harm them when they walk past. And it's it seems to just be like the way our society views girls, specifically young women, specifically school girls is sort of.

Ebony Bennett [00:15:35] Yeah. And you're absolutely right about how young it starts. I think of the women that we surveyed. At least half said it had happened before they were 18, if not more than that. So it was huge numbers. So it's definitely amongst straight harassment. Anyway, it was really obvious that it was definitely targeted at young women. I did want to move now more towards, I guess, the education and the other engagement that you're having with police and others. You talked about the fact that some of the young perpetrators or some young men, even if they're not perpetrators, kind of resisting this idea about how widespread this problem is and how many young men engage in this type of behaviour. And some of those men don't want to admit to what they've done for the obvious justice implications that they might face criminal charges. For example, a couple of years back, I spoke to Toronto Burke, who was the founder of the May two movement, and she was accepting the twenty nineteen Sydney peace prize. And she wrote and talked a lot about the fact that it's important for accountability to be led by survivors and that because I might just read you a quote actually, she said, We also need to have more intentional public dialogue about accountability and not just the kind that focuses on crime and punishment, but on harm and harm reduction and narrowing our focus to investigations, firings and prison can hinder that conversation and the reality that accountability and justice look different for different people, that sexual violence happens on a spectrum. So accountability also has to happen on a spectrum. And that means that various ways of being accountable are necessary and that it's survivors that have to be the ones leading that. So it really struck me, I guess, in terms of that harm reduction approach that Toronto Burke was talking about, that you're pushing kind of education and much earlier consent education within the school system. But also, I might ask you in a minute to talk a little bit about Operation Vest, but can you just tell me first about that education side of things and the work that you're doing in that space with schools and how receptive they've been to making those kinds of changes that you're thinking?

Chanel Contos [00:18:06] Yes, sir, in terms of the education space, it's kind of been like a bit of a stepping stone. It started with my initial target audience, which was my old school, which is an independent or girls school in Sydney. And it's kind of like the neighbouring single sex schools around that area. And then it just kind of kept going up and up and up to the point where I now speaking with a car, which is the Australian curriculum and reporting Australian curriculum and reporting authority and the minister of Education for Australia, Alan Tudge. But in terms of independent schools, there's been some schools that have really led in the space. You know, we've had Sydney boys, which had a few testimonies, and our side announced that they will be investing twenty five thousand dollars in reforming content education. I know that my old school has created a working group of about eight or so people that are involved in reforming not just content education, but the culture around content, dealing with education for not just the perspective of children, but teachers and parents personal bias. And I know that the been schools like, for example, a religious school in Sydney, a very independent like kind of a religious school in Sydney, has really led the way in showing how content, education and religious ethics can be taught hand in hand and not mutually exclusively. But there still is pushback from some schools, like one of the schools that was the one of the most named schools on my side. I think around 250 times the headmaster stopped replying to emails. And, you know, this it's not everyone's entirely keen to fully face this, but I think when you're dealing with Piromya child sexual assault, it's it's quite hard to deny that there is a problem, especially when you have that evidence bank. And overall, the reception has been really productive. And I mean, the cost is so simple. It's l'oeil, it's more holistic consent, education. And

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when I say more holistic, I mean talking about power imbalances, talking about, you know, explicitly detailing how this plays out in different sexual situations with strangers or with long partners, things like that.

Ebony Bennett [00:20:30] Yeah, I was going to ask next about the work with the police and operation best in particular. Can you just tell us for people who don't know what that operation is about and your engagement with it?

Chanel Contos [00:20:45] Yeah. So New South Wales Police has an anonymous reporting option, which basically means you are able to submit your story, a story like submit your security experience. Yeah. In the criminal matter with like detail about where you are, what the perpetrator was wearing, how well you know them. If you know their address, things like that, and the purpose of it was if you've experienced sexual assault and you're not, then ready to go and report to police because we all know how triggering of a process that could be and how difficult that is, especially for young girls to do, is you do it from the comfort of your home in your laptop, and you type it all while it's in your head. And then in the future, if you ever want to call back on that, that experience, there's a database there. So it already exists. And you've given the information when it was fresh in your head. I worked with Stacey Maloney, who at the time was head of Sex Crimes Squad in New South Wales. And we basically kind of rebranded the same system, Labor to Operation Vest and did two things with it. One, we advertised heavily, so people were aware that it was an option because it was something that people didn't know about. And to we reframed in a way to say, report or historical case, we will look for repeat offenders. And then if anyone ever comes in in the future to officially and formally report a sexual assault, your testimony is there to even back up in terms of the victim blaming from the police perspective, sorry, some great mystery, the threat from even like the police person's perspective in terms of looking back at this. I mean, like, oh, this person has done this three times before and really encouraging that person in front of them to take the case seriously. You can choose to leave your number so they can be called back up so the victims can be put in touch with what they both want and things like that. And it's basically a way of being like, you know, accountability is being held. We don't have any interest in taking these six thousand five hundred teenage boys to jail that did these things 10 years ago. But from now on, what you do in the future matters. So if you believe that there may be an operation best report about you, you know, be extremely cautious of their actions and they kind of just normalises the reporting process. Get someone that one step closer to be able to feel empowered to make a formal report. Yeah, but what about kind of like options or accountability? One hundred percent agree with that. We need more options for especially youth survivors to be able to hold accountability in a way that is not traumatic for them.

Ebony Bennett [00:23:23] Yeah, and as you said, not everyone has great experiences with the justice system. So it is important to have that range of options. But what you've just said that really struck me as being incredibly useful. I know there was a big review of I mean, there was in the United States a bunch of rape kits that had never been tested, tens and tens and thousands of them. And they started submitting them all and processing them all. And it turned out that there were they identified multiple serial perpetrators, serial rapists, just from processing those kits. So it can be a behaviour that obviously with many repeat offenders in there. So really important work to be doing.

And what does that mean? Like in terms of working with New South Wales police, how open have they been to feedback from you and other survivors and organisations who advocate on behalf of sexual assault victims?

Chanel Contos [00:24:21] I mean, really great, especially I'm Stacey Maloney, who has since been promoted, which is slightly unfortunate because I loved her in that role. But I mean, it's because she's going to do amazing things wherever she goes, but just so open to so open to engaging with youth. So victim Stacey, like her mindset is rape is a preventable crime. And if the police had thought that way for the last 50 years, we wouldn't be in the situation we're in now. But, you know, it's always been very like victim blaming in nature the kind of questions that you tend to get asked when you do make reports and things like that. So, yeah, it's been a really a really pleasant experience. And in the month operation was launched, there was a 61 percent unprecedented increase in sexual assault reports in New South Wales.

Ebony Bennett [00:25:13] Wow. Yeah, that's amazing result. Um, I did just want to ask you, I guess I know you're in London, but I'm hearing in the Canberra bubble and I guess it's been just a huge year and a real moment that we find ourselves in. We had the Britney Higgins coming forward with rape allegations in parliament that really created quite a storm. And now I believe this charge has been laid in her case. But we've also seen kind of some amazing reporting led by women members of the press gallery of those allegations, but also any number of other stories that we could point to this year. And seems like a real reckoning that Australia is having in a real moment where so many women are coming forward, being supported by other women and other survivors. In a way that just can't be ignored at the beginning of the year, obviously Grace Time, one Australian of the Year as an activist who is working for change. Do you feel like there's still a lot of momentum as a result of all of all of that happening this year? And it still feels like there's a lot of capacity for change.

Chanel Contos [00:26:31] And do I think the momentum is still going on that's based on things like the fact that Britney Higgins' case is coming up? We know that that's going to explode in the media. That's going to be a monumental moment that could either be really powerful and empowering for survivors or, you know, it could be very disheartening and anger everyone all over again. You know, in terms of engagement with the type of questions I'm posing on social media about rape culture and rape and things like that, like people are a little bored of the conversation because they wanted this conversation for so long. And, you know, every every couple of weeks, someone around Australia speaking up on the news. And it's just it's amazing. But we need to get to a point where we start realising that someone needs to not be newsworthy to speak up about a sexual assault because it happens daily and it just needs to be normal. You know, it's not so an anomaly for it to happen. It's an anomaly for it to be reported. And once we start understanding that as a whole, we'll make it so much easier for people to come forward to their friends, to their families, confronting perpetrators, holding accountability for your friends who may be perpetrators, things like that. But you have to ask your question. In short, I don't think the momentum is going anywhere anytime soon.

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Ebony Bennett [00:27:45] Yeah, we'll get to questions from the audience soon. So we've got about five hundred and twenty people on the line with us. So we'll get to those very shortly. But I guess where to from here for you and the activism that you're doing at the moment?

Chanel Contos [00:28:02] So does the activism I'm doing at the moment. I would say my goals are on teachers consent. Schools, in essence, is to mandate consent in the Australian curriculum, which means that all schools in Australia need to teach this content, because even if you have it in state curriculum, it's not mandated in independent schools, in the independent sector in Australia is massive, too. We need we need reform to initial teacher education. We need to train our teachers to be transformative actors in promoting a healthy culture. It's one thing to have a curriculum. It's a whole other thing about how it's taught. And that's not specific to the teachers who are teaching sexuality education and consent and is to be something that teaches on playground duty, know how to address when they hear sexist comments or, you know, objectifying remarks. And then what I think is almost most important is just a national conversation. We need to change perspectives. We need to be parents, teachers, government officials, educators and children to reflect on what they think is normal and what the result of that has been, which is widespread sexual violence mainly perpetrated on girls and women to say what can be done differently and just be open to reflection and change so that we create a society where, one, it's easy to come forward and gain support if something does happen to you and it just doesn't happen to you because people know it's wrong and the culture doesn't make it so it pervades without accountability. Yeah. And in a personal sense, I just want to finish my master's and try to come home.

Ebony Bennett [00:29:34] Twenty thousand words, I think you were saying before we got there. That's a lot. So good luck with that. Certainly. And knowing that you've got that deadline barrelling towards, you were even more grateful that you could join us today all the way from London. So I think I'll go right now to questions from the audience. The first one's more of a comment and a question. I've got a big hi here from your mom and dad, which has got so many likes that it's risen to the top. So thank you for coming in, Mr and Mrs Contos. We appreciate it. And what an amazing daughter that you've raised and what a great job she's doing here today. The next question is from Allen Wu and he says, So many female friends have spoken out about their experience of sexual assault, which has me thinking that statistically I must know some male perpetrators. What should the approach be when we think of one of our friends as being the perpetrator who has assaulted someone?

Chanel Contos [00:30:33] Yes, Alan, you're completely correct in saying that statistically is the case. And I mean, from a personal perspective, one of the hardest things in this campaign for me has been finding out which of my male friends have been sexual assault in that years. Obviously, each individual person is going to handle that situation differently. It depends on the specific sexual assault, sexual harassment, rape case and your relationship with that person. But like from a personal perspective, my campaign is all about future change and being able to reflect, take accountability for your own actions and do better in future. And if someone is not ready and when they were 15 years old, did something that they look back on and really heavily regret and say they regret, I think something as simple as a conversation could be insanely powerful, making sure that, you know, that they see why and how that was wrong and that they felt empathy and guilt for that

action. Because, as I said, it's not my intention to send six thousand five hundred young boys that did this years ago to jail today. But, yeah, I think everyone needs to take with them the heavy message in their day to day life that, you know, someone who's been sexually assaulted and someone who sexually assaulted someone. And that means you need to act accordingly in a way that one means that you're always creating a safe space for people to feel like they can trust in you. And to that you're making sure that you're doing things to stop rape culture being perpetuated through everyday objectifying comments, victim blaming, rape jokes, street harassment, all of these things, because those micro aggressions is what makes the culture go so unnoticed. And yeah, just remember that someone doesn't need to be sadistic to rape someone. They literally just need to be entitled to someone's body and not have an understanding or a respect for consent. So, yeah, it is obviously different in every individual case. But I think the most important thing to do is remember though that that is the reality.

Ebony Bennett [00:32:34] Mhm. Yeah. And important to remember because as you said, so many people kind of think of rape as being a stranger in an, you know, in a dark alley and that's just so often not the case, so often it is someone that the victim knows. The next question here is from Melina Smith. She could be a big international question here. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has resigned after a sexual harassment report and numerous women going public with their stories. Do we need more men resigning like this here in Australia to have a cultural change in elite circles?

Chanel Contos [00:33:12] Oh, my gosh. OK, so as I said before, that thing I could talk about is that I said, OK, we're going to go into it briefly now. So essentially what my dissertation is on is about how elite schooling institutions uphold structures of power. This is in terms of race class. And I'm kind of like filling the gap in literature with a look at gender. And what happens is we have these elite institutions that foster a rape culture. They foster, you know, a massive boys club, toxic masculinity and, you know, an environment where boys are socialise only with each other, which makes their interactions with girls on a Saturday night when alcohol is really problematic. What you have is those elite private school boys grow up and then just go straight into positions of power in parliament and, you know, charities in banks and all of these things. And I mean, if everyone who's ever sexually harassed someone retired right now, I think our economy would collapse. I say that with the heavy heart. So, again, it needs to be about accountability and reflection. And there's a trade off because I know someone who did that to someone should not be in a position of power. But the reality is, so many who have done that are in positions of power. And as I said, our society, like they're currently the people churning out society through. So what we need is we need accountability to be able to be held, understanding that there is a spectrum of sexual violence. And for some people, yes, they should never see the light of day again. For some people, they should never be in a position of power. And, you know, for other people, it needs to we need to change the narrative so that it's normal to apologise. It's normal to hold accountability, and it's normal to be a big role model for younger boys and men and people who have similar claims against them to tell them that because being a rapist doesn't you don't you very rarely get held accountable in your life for it. And again, I say that with a very heavy heart. So we just need to change the narrative about it. But also someone who is in an active position of power, like that specific New York case where he is actively sexually harassing his employees, obviously. Absolutely. Got to guard plays resign. Yes. But I'm talking about people who have done things historically in their youth is kind of been my conversation usually focussed.

Ebony Bennett [00:35:31] Mm. And I'll also point, I guess, people towards the Australian Human Rights Commission, they've done a lot of work around sexual harassment in the workplace, which is still rife. But again, going back to what Chanel's has been talking about and what we've been talking about with Survivor led justice and accountability for a lot of women in the workplace, they just want it to stop. You know, that's the outcome that they're looking for, for example. So there's a range of outcomes there that people are looking for. But again, the Australian Human Rights Commission, they've done huge reports into that. A lot of recommendations, including at the Parliament House. And the next question is from Louise Court. She says, Hi, Chanel, I'm a strong advocate for early consent, education in schools and something I feel very passionate about. In your opinion, what's the best thing she can do to help create change?

Chanel Contos [00:36:33] So I believe that the best thing individuals can do is kind of go to schools in their local area and their old schools and not just advocate for kids and education in terms of saying that's going to be taught to students for one hour a year through the lives, but instead changing kind of the culture and like encouraging schools to conduct parent surveys and encouraging schools to hold seminars and get people in to talk to teachers, principals, parents themselves. So, yeah, I feel like as an individual, there's so much you can do. And doing it at a local level is usually really, really effective because you kind of get noticed and the people are willing to engage with you. And it means that you can kind of stay quiet intertwined with the whole situation. And you can also support teachers, can follow us on Instagram and kind of follow up close to actions when we're trying to do large things.

Ebony Bennett [00:37:32] Excellent. That's teach us consent so you can probably find them if you Google them, I'm guessing. Cherno, the next question is from Margaret Tipa. She says they may need to be some trauma counselling to deal with teachers that are going to introduce the subjects as they may have been assaulted when they were younger. And that also makes me think about you and the people who work in this space as well as I said it might be. Well, I'm sure it is very traumatic to be reading these testimonies all the time and just dealing with other people's trauma vicariously. How important is trauma counselling going to be for educators who are doing this kind of thing? And how important is it for activists who are working in this space?

Chanel Contos [00:38:21] It's yeah, it's insanely important, I think, about this a lot, I think about the fact that if we do get consent in the Australian curriculum, it is something that, you know, I think it's called different things in different states, but not PDP type of teacher delivers. We're gonna have two things that we're going to have a lot of survivors who have to then talk about consent and sexual assault to students themselves. We're going to have perpetrators who have to sit there and deliver education to students themselves. And this kind of like trauma counselling. I don't know if it's even though ideally everyone should have access to it from a practical sense, I don't know how sustainable that is for all teachers where the education system is already. So push resources itself. But this is why it's so important to have this sort of information in initial teacher education, which means when we're training teachers, we equip them with the skills to how to deal with traumatic experiences, how to deal with a situation where the child comes to you and tells you that their home life is not safe. How to make sure that in that moment you're making it a comfortable experience for

them, how to make sure in that moment that you're keeping a level of. You know, empathy, but also protecting your own emotions at the same time, because as a teacher, this is something that's going to happen to you multiple times throughout throughout your career. So it is insanely important. And I think that, again, we need to be taught through generations, through our parents, how to make sure that when people do come to us with these sort of situations, we can help in a way that sent us the experience around the victim, but also protect your own mental health. And that's kind of a whole other kind of worms that's going to be hard to do. But is necessarily.

Ebony Bennett [00:40:10] Yeah, which that brings me to you just kind of mentioned the role of parents say I've got a couple of questions in here about kind of challenging this idea that consent coming through, education coming through schools, should it not be and kind of thing. It shouldn't be the primarily the school's responsibility. Shouldn't it be driven at home, in family and in society? And I guess could you comment or respond to that as a couple of questions in here to kind of make that same point?

Chanel Contos [00:40:42] Yes, I mean, ideally, an education comes through all the civil society, all the way from the media, our parents, peers, education system, my muscles is in gender and education and how that creates development. And I just personally say education is the largest catalyst for creating societal change, which is why I'm so passionate advocate for it so passionately, however. The other main thing about education is it can be standardised. We can make sure that every Australian child has content education. You can't make sure that every parent delivers content education to their child. You can't check how that is done. You can't make sure that will be done in a safe way. You can't make sure that will be done in a way that is truthful. Because if you're if you are a parent in Australia right now and you went through the Australian education system, you didn't receive adequate content education. So you would have to take it upon yourself to learn those things yourself. And I see it as well as I think that it's it's ideally it would come from both parents and and schools. But I think that it does need to be in our schools because it needs to be something that not only every student knows, but that every student knows, that every other student knows that we can hold each other accountable.

Ebony Bennett [00:42:03] Hmm. The next question is from Marlina Smith. She says, Do we need more female representation in our parliament so women can be involved in more policy decisions that affect younger Australians?

Chanel Contos [00:42:17] I mean, one hundred percent, our policies and structural conditions, the whole society skewed to benefit men and make it difficult, difficult for victims of. Then perpetrated violence, and having that from a top level would filter down in policy in your culture and everything, and it's absolutely fundamental to have female voices in room who make up an equal part to point out when a policy is going to be counterproductive. I'll point out when when an issue needs to be at the forefront of topics.

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Ebony Bennett [00:42:58] And if anyone doubts the necessity of having equal female representation, I'd recommend people check out on I.B., the misrepresented series on ABC, which is focussed a lot on the experiences of Australia's first female politicians and including the experiences of a lot of current ones and how appalling things still out on a number of fronts, but also the change that women have created through Parliament. Definitely a great one to check out the next question that I have. Where is it? I've lost it now. It's from John Knive Nave, who says, How important is a gender diverse judiciary and better trained and gender diverse police force in terms of giving victims more confidence in coming forward?

Chanel Contos [00:43:51] Again, I think having your females in positions of power changes the whole perspective about kind of like policies and culture and the situation. So, yeah, it is a very, very important part. But I mean, you can still experience extreme misogyny perpetrated by a woman or a female. And it's that's not going to fix all of our issues. That still needs to be a cultural change. And what I'm talking about culture change. I'm not just talking about the men in our society. I'm also talking about everyone. I'm talking about people who have been socialised as women as well. There's lots of learning we have to do as a society. But more importantly and almost Hotta is the money we have to do as a society. And understanding kind of power structures as a whole will help that. But it's it's a good start, but it's not going to it's not going to be the four issues solved.

Ebony Bennett [00:44:49] The next question is from Indira Rosenthal. She says, What are the main obstacles to having consent taught in all schools in Australia and what are the roadblocks?

Chanel Contos [00:45:00] The main obstacles is kind of society's perception of what is socially acceptable to speak to a child about, including sexual consent. There is also conversations, you know, I've been posed by members of parliament that instead we should teach abstinence because, you know, they say that it's not always. Yeah, you know, we say that like hundreds of times over. But yet they say it's just as radical as idea of what I'm proposing. And they believe it will have the same effect. But to me, that is just it just screams that that person doesn't know what consent is because you can rape your wife, you can write your husband, you can teach consent and abstinence in conjunction if a school wishes to, because consent, sexual sexual assault is not a choice and abstinence is and gathers. It tends to be the facts that essentially our society doesn't like speaking to children about sex and loves to forget the idea that children are engaging with sexual content on the Internet from the age of 11 on average in Australia, and the fact that they speak to their friends about it, they see it in movies, they know what sex is. And all we're doing is creating an unhealthy environment where there's not an open conversation in the community about it. But I feel like that tends to be tends to be the biggest roadblock, really. The fact that I also the fact that people think the curriculum is really packed already and that consent isn't an entire priority, that we're taking out too much at a time. But I think we need more.

Ebony Bennett [00:46:36] And I'm definitely the next question is from Bready Pecorella, who asks, Have you had many reflections from gender diverse people and people identifying as diverse sexualities? And how have they sat alongside the other testimonies and contributions?

Chanel Contos [00:46:53] For sure? Are the types of conversations I've had in terms of from a testimony perspective has been that has stood out to me, have usually made from gay men who had not come out to their friends and family when they were at school. And they have just told me over like a handful, maybe like five to eight conversations with different different men about how they've just been left especially vulnerable to sexual assault because they didn't have any sex ed, because our sex ed, the minimum that we do get is all about heterosexual relationships. And, you know, they talk about the fact that because there's a taboo around their sexuality in their childhood, they usually go to the Internet or like older men usually prey on them and things like that as a way to explore their sexuality for the first time. And this leaves them very vulnerable to grooming, to sexual assault and things like that. And it's yeah, it's quite heartbreaking to hear it from that perspective. I also have a few of my closest friends, non binary, but we socialise as girls and experience life as girls. And it's yeah, it's really interesting to see, like one of my best friends called the Non Binary, they were sexually assaulted when they're young, subject to we went to school together, like subject to all the same things that we were on a Day-To-Day basis. And then the other day I was talking about how I get scared walking through London alone. And they're like, I don't get scared at all. And I'm like, Oh, that's because you kind of look like a boy, like nice, that'll keep you safe. So I think that, you know, it's it's a while. This affects all different sexualities and gender diverse people. The common thread does tend to be people who are perceived by society as girls. Women are most adversely affected in that moment and people whose sexual partners are men seem to be most affected by sexual assault.

Ebony Bennett [00:48:59] The next question is from Jesmyn, where she says, How would you suggest navigating a conversation about consent and rape culture with a friend or family member who's reluctant to acknowledge the severity and the legitimacy of the issue?

Chanel Contos [00:49:15] Called it's a hot one that needs to be a trade off because obviously everyone needs to take it upon themselves to try educate your friends and family, things like that. But you also need to have your own mental health. And sometimes it can be exhausting and you get to a point where you can't, especially if you're a victim yourself, you're very triggering yourself when you try to engage in these conversations. But I mean, I think just starting with, like, little things and avoiding buzzwords. I love buzzwords. I love toxic masculinity. I love rape culture. I love saying I love slut shaming. But, you know, when you're having conversations with people who may be turned off by those sort of things, you know, just saying like, oh, attitudes towards gender are like, oh, it's really weird that this seems to happen to girls more than boys, you know, just kind of like getting it in the slowly so that when you do have these larger conversations make sense. And then as hard as it is to kind of, I guess, try like stay calm in that conversation. But again, I'm completely acknowledging that being able to stay calm through a conversation about sexual assault is a level of privilege that most victims and survivors don't have. But, yeah, I mean, it's hard because the whole thing about this is by not just educating students, we're basically like tipping Australia upside down. I mean, like, actually everything that you've been teaching throughout society so far has led to this. So we can't do that anymore. And it's really hard for a lot of people, especially older generations, who are really used to having their child, their beliefs challenged.

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Ebony Bennett [00:50:46] The next question is from Bronwyn Curry. She says, In March of this year, we have the Australia Wide Women's March for Justice. I was an organiser for the Melbourne rally where 20 thousand women and allies came out. Congratulations and thank you, Bronwyn. Speaking with friends afterwards, I was surprised at the number of male partners of friends who said they felt targeted or even attacked by these events. That's quite telling. What do you think is the most achievable way for men to come on board in supporting women and young girls to achieve true equality in our society? Just a small question for you there. You know,

Chanel Contos [00:51:24] first of all, thank you so much for organising that much for justice. That was an amazing historic moment in Australia. Look, there's two things we need to do, we need to we need to, one, make men and boys comfortable and engage in this conversation because unfortunately, the structural conditions of our society make it so that are those in positions of power and they are those who have the most ability to create change all the way up from politicians to the cool boys at school. The other thing we need to do is we can't like we can't beat around the bush that much. Like we also need to be willing, like it's uncomfortable. It is really uncomfortable to hold yourself accountable. It is really uncomfortable to realise that all those times your friend made drinks when you were 15, but the situation where your friend got raped when she was 16. But it's also really uncomfortable being sexually assaulted and sexually harassed. So every day lives and there's different types of challenges that we're facing right now to get over this. So I think that including men in the conversation is absolutely essential. And we need to do it in a way so that, again, like my fundamental belief is all about like from this very moment on, from when you learn a new information, how you deal with that in future, that that's what's absolutely fundamental, because our current justice system does not hold accountability for perpetrators of these actions. And, you know, things as little as a bit like a car honk or a sexual harassment, things like that. There's not many people in our society who haven't done that at some stage. But, yeah, I think it's being able to kind of like swallow your pride for a second and sit with that discomfort and then go forward with that to be better. And also just kind of taking it for yourself, like kind of give men leadership roles in the sense of being like, OK, you you agree this is bad and think about how much good you can do if you use your influence as a man in your society, in your friend group to go and change that. But, yeah, it's it's really a hard line that's hard to tell between keeping men like in this conversation without leading it, because obviously so does need to be led by survivors.

Ebony Bennett [00:53:32] The next question is from Schneeman name. And she says, How willing do you think the federal government is to take serious action, particularly men dating consent, education in private and religious schools?

Chanel Contos [00:53:45] I think they're on the brink of mandating content education in Australian schools in terms of how seriously they're willing to take sexual assault as a concept and what it actually is affecting them specifically in their party, when it's their friends, when it's the people they've elected into positions of power to know how seriously they're willing to take it there. I mean, I feel like that's true of a lot of people. Everyone's happy to stand up against rape culture until it's their best friend being accused or their friend coming forward as a victim. But I think that, as I said, it's pretty hard to argue with teaching consent because it's pretty hard to argue with the fact that there's something wrong with child sexual assault.

Ebony Bennett [00:54:28] Absolutely, there's a couple of questions here around how can we get to read about some of the actual content and methodology of some of the new content, education, things that are coming through, trying to give us, again, teach us content. Are there any other resources that you would recommend for people?

Chanel Contos [00:54:51] So I'll let you know what's happening in government at the moment. So you remember that like milkshake tobacco when they try to hold the government tried to do for Americans on education and ended up with this metaphorical video of someone shoving a milkshake in someone's face, people who don't. And basically, since then, they had this website called The Good Society. And the government has assembled a panel which is conducting a review on the material on that website to see what could be problematic or harmful, counterproductive to teach our teens. But I mean, there are lots of great TED talks are concerned. There are lots of great books, especially for parents, how to teach young children how to socialise young children the way that this is kind of fundamental to them. And unfortunately, like in Australia, what you can do is you can have someone come in and give a consent to a school where you can pay quite a lot of money to have a really comprehensive consent to experience, whether that be to students, teachers, parents or organisations, things like that. But, yeah, it's it's quite it's not designed as there's a go to website. And I think, you know, that's a that's sorely lacking in the market. But I'm hoping to add more and more resources to teachers content commons as I have time here.

Ebony Bennett [00:56:11] And I will also point out the meta movement has a lot of resources that you can look up as well in terms of support, particularly for survivors of sexual assault and things like that. So there's plenty available online. And I will just mention that if this conversation has raised any issues for me, for you, you can call Lifeline on one three, double one one four. That's crisis support and suicide prevention. And there's lots of other available, I guess, support services available as well. But we hope that this conversation hasn't been too triggering for people we really appreciate. You know, we've had hundreds of you online with us today up above five hundred for this conversation. So obviously an incredible conversation and an important one to be having. And thanks so much for coming along today. Chanel, is there anything else that you want to add? We've got a couple of minutes to go and then we'll wind up

Chanel Contos [00:57:17] just to thank everyone so much for being part of this conversation with, like, whatever your views are on it, keep it in. Dialogue is absolutely essential to everything being open to critical reflection. And, yeah, looking towards the future is just it's I think the momentum is still going and I hope everyone can keep it going.

Ebony Bennett [00:57:39] Yeah, well, you've managed to have a huge impact in a very short space of time. So congratulations and thank you for all your activism. I'm sure it's made a huge difference for a lot of people and will for many years to come. Hugely important work. And thank you again so much for joining us today, particularly with your master's due. So class, we do appreciate your time, which is obviously a very big bonus.

Chanel Contos [00:58:08] Thank you so, so much for having me.

Ebony Bennett [00:58:10] And thank you again, everyone, for joining us today. We appreciate that so many of you came along, particularly because we're at a bit of a different time as well. Thanks for all your amazing questions. I'm sorry that we couldn't get to all of them, but there was some really great ones in there and I hope we tackled a good variety of them. We will have to wrap it up there. Thanks again to Chanel Kantos. Hello again to her mom and dad who are watching. And don't forget to subscribe to Australia Institute DOT TV. You can find all the recordings from our previous webinars and this one will be up in the next day or so on a YouTube channel. You can subscribe there and also to our podcast, Follow the Money, which you can find on well, wherever you normally listen to podcasts, you can find and subscribe to it there. And thanks so much for coming along today. Stay safe out there, everyone, particularly as the pandemic seems to be getting worse here in Australia. Get vaccinated when and if you can as soon as possible. I'm booked in here in the Blessed People's Republic of the 1st September for my files, the vaccine. So I know it's difficult to find them, but we are encouraging everyone to get vaccinated when they can stay safe out there. Everyone, we hope to see you next week. And thanks again to you. Chanel by.

Chanel Contos [00:59:28] So much of any.