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Not on our watch

The Saturday Paper, Melbourne



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Leaked documents show the Morrison government is actively undermining respectful relationships education and preventing expert materials from being taught.

Kristine Ziwica

is a Melbourne-based journalist and writer.

It started with an angry article in *The Sunday Mail*. The piece said children as young as 12 were being given “state-sanctioned sexting tips” in a link connected to Our Watch’s respectful relationship program, The Line.

“Most messages were too raunchy for publication,” the Murdoch tabloid warned, “but examples include ‘I want you to be really rough’ and ‘I’m going to let you do anything you want to me.’”

Anne Ruston, then minister for Social Services and now also the minister for Women’s Safety, ordered Our Watch to take down The Line. It did. That was nearly 18 months ago.

Now, documents seen exclusively by *The Saturday Paper* reveal the extent to which the Morrison government is not only sidelining experts in the development of respectful relationships education but actively undermining it.

They suggest the Morrison government is bullying into silence the country’s leading umbrella body for the prevention of violence against women, Our Watch.

Concerned women’s safety advocates, including 2015 Australian of the Year Rosie Batty, are choosing to speak out because they believe it is important to protect the integrity of this work – work they say is a central plank to a future free of violence against women and children.

They’re asking why The Line, an award-winning, youth-oriented, respectful relationships campaign, run by Our Watch

since 2015, was forced offline in late 2019 – and has been kept offline for more than a year.

They’re also asking why the Morrison government chose to spend nearly \$3.8 million developing The Good Society, an alternative suite of respectful relationship resources for schools that sought to teach young people about consent through the metaphor of milkshakes, sharks and tacos, instead of funding Our Watch to further develop resources it has been trialling for schools.

These questions come ahead of the planned national women’s safety summit in July, scheduled to inform the development of the next National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women – under the auspices of which The Line was first developed.

Batty said these “evidence-based, best-practice respectful relationships resources” are the legacy she and her late son, Luke, who was killed by his father in 2014, will leave. “It’s an issue I felt passionately about after Luke’s death, and still do,” she said.

“I am profoundly disappointed that this government opted to invest in milkshakes, tacos and sharks, rather than support the further development of Our Watch’s program of work, which is aligned to a whole-of-school approach that tackles the underlying drivers of violence against women, including gender inequality.”

Ruston acknowledges that The Line was taken down at her instruction, following inquiries from *The Sunday Mail*, but *The*



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Saturday Paper has been presented with two different accounts as to why it has remained offline for so long: one from Ruston's office and another from internal Department of Social Services documents chronicling Our Watch's dealings with the Women's Safety minister during the past year and a half.

When approached by *The Saturday Paper* last month, a spokesperson for Ruston said: "The Morrison government is committed to providing young people with the tools they need to understand respectful relationships, disrespect and consent and remains committed to The Line initiative.

"But the minister does not believe that information on how to send naked pictures is appropriate for children as young as 12, which is why she asked Our Watch to take down the website to review and update the content."

As to why The Line has remained offline long after the controversial link to sexting was removed, Ruston's spokesperson said: "Our Watch decided to use the opportunity to refresh The Line."

When asked the same week on the ABC's *Background Briefing* why The Line has remained offline for so long, the minister gave a similar answer: "Our Watch has taken it upon themselves to do a complete review of the site."

However, documents seen by *The Saturday Paper* tell a very different story. Our Watch cannot take The Line back online without ministerial approval, something that has not been forthcoming.

What's more, the Department of Social Services instructed two external consultancies, the Nous Group and La Trobe, to conduct extensive reviews of both The Line and Our Watch – at a cost to taxpayers of \$60,000 and \$345,000 respectively.

The Nous Group was commissioned in January 2020 to conduct a review of The Line and its "vetting, quality assurance and moderation processes" to "ensure the content meets community standards".

La Trobe was engaged in May the same year to conduct a broader review and evaluation of Our Watch.

The timing and circumstances of the La Trobe review has raised eyebrows among several sources.

One expert with knowledge of recent events, who asked not to be named as they are not authorised to speak publicly, says the two reviews contributed to a "culture of fear" – effectively silencing the peak body for the prevention of violence against women.

In November 2020, a year after The Line went dark and following the completion of the

Nous review into the resources, a brief from the family safety branch of the Department of Social Services was sent to Ruston's office. It recommended that The Line be reinstated.

The brief included a supporting statement from Our Watch, entitled "Our Watch observations and conclusions".

While the Our Watch supporting statement said the department-ordered review of The Line identified opportunities for both Our Watch and the department to improve the campaign, it "confirmed that The Line was reaching young people with much needed and valued evidence-based information about sex, dating and relationships".

The supporting statement noted that Our Watch wished to make The Line available again "as soon as possible". It expressed concern about the added urgency of the pandemic, as young people were spending more time at home and online and were therefore more likely to be at risk. During this time, the supporting brief says, "Our Watch has received a significant increase in requests from youth practitioners for The Line."

Ruston's office has had both documents for six months. Meanwhile, the minister has repeatedly suggested that the decision to keep The Line offline was Our Watch's choice.

When contacted by *The Saturday Paper* for comment, a spokesperson for Our Watch said "they continue to work with the Department of Social Services to bring the campaign back online".

She added that: "The review confirmed that The Line content is relevant and engaging for young people, aligned to the evidence base, and is age and stage appropriate."

Ruston's office did not respond to questions about the minister's previous claims about why The Line has remained offline for so long.

Sharna Bremner, the founder of End Rape on Campus, criticised The Good Society videos when they were published. She said there was a double standard in the response – to remove some of The Good Society videos and take down The Line entirely – and a lack of transparency and accountability.

"The fact that they pulled The Line, which was relatable, useful, evidence based and inclusive – it met all of the international standards – and opted for something like The

Good Society, that doesn't even meet the most basic requirements, is deeply concerning," she said. "They're playing silly buggers with a vital program of work, and it has to stop."

Katrina Marson, a criminal lawyer and lead researcher for primary prevention



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at Rape and Sexual Assault Research and Advocacy, said the government was making similar errors to those that have been made in other countries around consent education.

“It sounds like the government fell prey to something that I saw overseas – the winds of opposition to this sort of education, which they see as a political risk,” says Marson, who recently completed a Churchill Fellowship looking at the implementation of relationships and sexuality education.

“But my research makes clear that the political risk is overestimated. Everywhere there has been really good implementation of respectful relationships education, they have confronted this vocal opposition, but the government backed the policy, which meant it was insulated. They recognised that although there are people who vocally oppose it, a greater number support it ... and that’s what we need to see here.”

Hayley Foster, the chief executive of Women’s Safety NSW, said she had hoped that Our Watch would be called on to develop further resources for schools.

“If this government is serious about addressing the root causes of gender-based violence, they need to listen to the experts,” she said.

“The Line’s continued absence leaves a gaping hole in critical resources [needed by] our frontline service providers who work in the primary prevention of violence against women.” ●

Declaration of interest: Kristine Ziwica worked at Our Watch more than five years ago, establishing the national media engagement initiative to improve reporting of violence against women. She has never worked on The Line and has not worked in any formal or informal capacity with Our Watch since.

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Family violence campaigner Rosie Batty. Supplied