



Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
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Dear Committee Secretary

**Submission to the Inquiry into the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 [Provisions]**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry. Wesnet is the national peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services. With almost 350 eligible members across Australia, we represent a range of organisations and individuals including women's refuges, shelters, safe houses and information/referral services. Wesnet is also recognised as the leading non-government organisation specialising in the intersection of family violence and technology abuse.

**Please note that given the short time frame provided for submissions, we have been unable to consult with our membership in the preparation of these comments.**

As experts in technology abuse, we are encouraged to see recognition of harms that can occur online, including through the misuse of social media platforms. We welcome any efforts to effectively address materials that depict or promote hate crimes, misogyny and violence against women and children. We also note that research from the eSafety Commissioner has found that 27% of domestic violence cases involve technology-facilitated abuse of children, and that 59% of these cases involve Facebook.<sup>i</sup> However, the same research found that phones were more likely to be involved than social media (phones were used in 79% of cases) with texting involved in 75% of cases.<sup>ii</sup>

While we recognise the intention of this bill is to protect, not isolate, young Australians, we would urge the Committee to consider the potential impacts on those impacted by domestic and family violence. Isolation is a common tactic of family violence perpetrators, and we are concerned that removing access to social platforms may increase the risk of isolation. As one young person surveyed by researchers from Sydney University commented:

*“I feel like in the case of lot of controlling parents it would be bad for the kid because then if the parents are controlling and they don't have any social media to talk to people, I feel like that could negatively impact the kid. Maybe they'd get lonely, or they wouldn't be able to use it as an outlet”.<sup>iii</sup>*

Recent research from Project Rokit found that 86% of young people surveyed experienced positive impacts from social media, while only 14% had not experienced positive impacts from social media.<sup>iv</sup> The same report found that 53% of young people surveyed “depend on social media in their daily lives.”<sup>v</sup> While marginalised groups are more likely to be impacted by harm online, it is also important to recognise the benefits of online spaces for young people affected by intersecting forms of oppression. For example, just over 1 in 3 LGBTIQ+ teenagers sought emotional support online (36%, compared with the national average of 18%).<sup>vi</sup> The combined impacts of isolation from family violence and other forms of harm with decreased access to online support should be carefully considered. While preventing young people from accessing certain platforms may stop abuse from occurring on those platforms, it may also take away important sites of support. Given this, we support the exclusion of messenger apps from the proposed ban.

The Committee should consider that the proposed amendments may simply encourage young people to find alternative ways to access social media. Further research from eSafety has shown that more than 80% of teenagers took “some form” of action after a negative online experience, with 43% of this group reporting the negative experience to friends or family.<sup>vii</sup> We are concerned the proposed bill will encourage teenagers to conceal their activities online and may inadvertently discourage them from taking actions to protect themselves from harm – including discussing abuse with their parents or caregivers.

We recognise that technology-facilitated abuse can pose a real danger to young people, and that perpetrators often misuse social media to further such harms. However, any legislative response should consider the complex role social media plays in the lives of young Australians. We would also encourage the Committee to not consider this issue in isolation from the broader issue of ending violence, particularly in the context of the Government's National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

Signed,

Karen Bentley  
CEO WESNET

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<sup>i</sup> eSafety (2020), *Children and technology facilitated abuse in domestic and family violence situations*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/Children%20and%20technology-facilitated%20abuse%20-%20Full%20report.pdf?v=1732233956353>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Humphrey, Page Jeffrey, Hutchinson & Boichak (2024), "Age verification for social media would impact all of us. We asked parents and kids if they actually want it", *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/age-verification-for-social-media-would-impact-all-of-us-we-asked-parents-and-kids-if-they-actually-want-it-230539>

<sup>iv</sup> Project Rocket (2024), *Shaping our Feeds: Young People's Experiences of Social Media Algorithms*, <https://assets.projectrocket.com.au/assets/Shaping-Our-Feeds-%E2%80%93-PROJECT-ROCKIT-compressed.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> eSafety (2024), *Tipping the balance: LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences negotiating connection, self-expression and harm online*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/Tipping-the-balance-June-2024.pdf?v=1732233903087>

<sup>vii</sup> eSafety (2021), *The digital lives of Aussie teens*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/The%20digital%20lives%20of%20Aussie%20teens.pdf?v=1732233950332>