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Hon. Dr. Carolyn Bennett
Parliamentary Office
804, Justice Building, House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Tuesday January 5, 2010

Dear Hon. Dr. Bennett:

We are writing to thank you for your recent interest in sexual health concerns related to the sex toy industry in Canada. We are pleased to hear of your commitment to raising awareness of sexual well-being and are impressed and excited by your statements encouraging our government not to shy away from discussions on matters such as sex toys because of potential personal discomfort.

We hope that your actions will give way to a larger national discussion on these matters. And it's in that spirit that we wanted to share some of our concerns about the way these issues are being framed both in your letter and in the media.

Our first concern is the framing of sex toy safety as an issue of concern to only, or primarily to women. A recently published article in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* reported that only slightly more women than men (52% vs. 45%)¹ use vibrators. But more importantly we don't believe that binary gender divisions are useful here. For-profit retailers may choose to market to a specific demographic, but as a co-operatively run sex store that represents Canadians of multiple genders, orientations, and identities, we can tell you that men, women, trans folk, people who don't feel like they fit in any of those categories, and people who identify as straight, gay, bisexual, and otherwise have been using sex toys for decades, and they are equally affected by sex toy safety. We'd like to propose that as we begin this conversation we invite everyone to participate, not only those with established political or financial clout.

Our second concern is about ideas of regulation, safety, and access. We're sure you agree with us that safety and risk exist on a continuum. The question that your letter poses for us is this: who benefits and who loses if only those products that carry zero risk are permitted to be sold? The toys that are currently being raised as potentially toxic represent those that are more

¹ Herbenick, D., Reece, M., Sanders, S.A., et. al. "Prevalence and Characteristics of Vibrator Use by Women in the United States: Results from a Nationally Representative Study" *Journal of Sexual Medicine*. Vol. 6, No. 7 (2009):1857 – 1866.

affordable, while the toys that are being held up as safer are financially out of reach for many of us. While we agree that further research should be done to determine the safety of sex toy materials, we are concerned that banning all but those that carry zero risk may be akin to demanding that we all eat organic--while this might be ideal, approaching the issue by simply banning all others produces risks leaving many hungry. At Come As You Are we believe that less expensive products increase accessibility to sexual exploration and health. We believe that informing consumers of the risks and teaching them how to protect themselves (for example, using condoms on toys) is preferable to attempting to ban all but the most expensive of products.

Finally, while we appreciate how difficult it is to prioritize health issues, we do want to propose that in Canada we have other, more urgent, sexual health issues, issues that are already well identified by research, and that arguably impact a larger number of Canadians. We are thinking of the fact that Indigenous women in this country continue to be many times more likely to die of cervical cancer than their Non-Indigenous counterparts² ; that abortions continue to be inaccessible to women across the nation, but in particular to women living in the north³ ; and that HIV in Canada continues to disproportionately affect specific populations, such as men who have sex with men and Aboriginal peoples⁴ .

While we care deeply and passionately about sex toys and their implication in sexual health, we believe that the above issues perhaps deserve more attention than the likely impossible task of regulating a largely undefined and under-researched product category such as sex toys.

We'd like to join with you and ensure that these issues and the many other sexual health issues facing Canadians today receive the time, funding, and consideration they are due.

Thank you again for raising this important issue. We look forward to the opportunity to discuss this with you in the future..

Wishing you a happy new year,

Ignacia Black, Annanda DaSilva, Charlotte Henderson, Holly Hirst, Reese Jones, gill lamon,
Sarah Forbes-Roberts, Cory Silverberg
Come As You Are Co-operative.

² National Aboriginal Health Organization. *Cancer of the Cervix in North American Indian Women: A literature review*. First Nations Centre, October 2006. Accessed 12/28/09.
http://www.naho.ca/firstnations/english/documents/research/FNC_CervicalCancerLiteratureReview.pdf

³ Shaw, Jessica. *Reality Check: A Close Look at Accessing Abortion Services in Canadian Hospitals*. Canadians for Choice Report Launch National Press Club. April 2nd 2007. Accessed 12/27/10.
<http://www.canadiansforchoice.ca/reportspeech.pdf>

⁴ Smith, Michael R. *HIV in Canada: Trends and Issues for Advancing Prevention, Care, Treatment and Support through Knowledge Exchange*. Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention & Control, PHAC. Accessed 1/1/10.
<http://www.catie.ca/pdf/CPHA2009/HIV%20in%20Canada%20-%20EN.pdf>