

# ***Push to Improve Sex Ed in Australia Comes From 10,000 Miles Away***

A grad student in London hoped to collect a few testimonies from teenage sexual assault victims for a petition to teach consent in schools. She got thousands.



Chanel Contos, 23, has led from London a push for schools in Australia to reform their education about consensual sex.

By [Isabella Kwai](#); Photos by Mary Turner for *The New York Times*

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LONDON — Not long ago, Chanel Contos was living the life of a typical graduate student, albeit a pandemic one: sleeping in late and attending online classes while enduring months of lockdown in her East London apartment.

But a petition she began that calls for schools in Australia, her home country, to reform their education about consensual sex — created after she and her close friends began

revisiting painful experiences of sexual assault they had suffered as students — changed that.

Suddenly, Ms. Contos was compiling thousands of survivor testimonies, fielding calls from journalists and briefing lawmakers on the pervasiveness of sexual assault. And she was doing it in video calls from her bedroom while her roommates slept next door.

“It’s something that happens every single day and no one talks about it, and it happens to children and it happens to teenagers,” she said of sexual assault. “Maybe the same boys who sexually assault people as teenagers take advantage of people in the workplace when they’re in powerful positions.”

Now Ms. Contos has the goal of achieving a significant policy change in Australia: making consent education mandatory in the national curriculum, which is currently undergoing a review.

Students are not given the skills to navigate intimate relationships early enough, Ms. Contos argues, and she believes this omission is partly to blame for the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault among teenagers.

She is part of a wave of young campaigners who are helping advance the #MeToo movement in Australia, where it got off to a slow start.

Her new organization, [Teach Us Consent](#), advocates that children learn about consent — not in a sexual context — as soon as they start school. As they mature, it calls for topics like sexual coercion and digital harassment to be addressed by the time they reach high school.

To opponents who say such education could encourage students to have sex earlier, Ms. Contos has a blunt reply: “Abstinence is a choice and sexual consent is not.”

In a year where allegations of rape and sexual harassment have reached the [upper levels of Australia’s government](#), her push for earlier consent education is garnering widespread attention.

In March, weeks after her petition first went viral — it now has more than 44,000 signatures — reports of sexual assault to police in New South Wales, Australia’s most populous state, [surged by 61 percent](#). The state of Victoria has announced that it will make consent education mandatory from an early age, and in July, [Queensland state said education on sexual consent](#) would both start earlier and be more explicit.



Much of her campaign for a nationwide change to Australia's sex-education curriculum has been waged from her bedroom in London.

Early, age-appropriate education about consensual contact — without necessarily mentioning sex — can set children up for better self-esteem, relationships and understanding of boundaries, and encourage them to treat people with dignity and respect, said Jessica Ringrose, a professor of sociology at University College London and an expert on gender, sexuality and education. “It should be happening earlier and all the research points to it.”

Campaigners like Ms. Contos are leveraging social media and survivor testimonials, Professor Ringrose said, to confront education officials with the severity of the behavior that often goes unreported.

The Australian media has turned to Ms. Contos, 23, to discuss consent education, and in the span of only a few months, her name has become almost synonymous with her cause; Prime Minister Scott Morrison has promised her a meeting. And she has taken on the unexpected role of spokeswoman for a national movement more than 10,000 miles from home.

She moved to London from Sydney during the pandemic to study for a master's degree in gender education and international development at University College London. The child of Greek immigrants, Ms. Contos grew up in an affluent beachside neighborhood of Sydney and attended a private school for girls, whose social scene included students at neighboring schools for boys.

At 13, she was sexually assaulted, she said, by a boy who she later discovered — to her horror — had later done the same to a friend. Initially, she blamed herself for not reporting him, but the lack of accountability for such violations soon angered her.

“If he had been taught respect, he wouldn’t have done it in the first place,” she said.

In early 2021, she began appealing on social media for testimonies from private school students in Sydney, thinking a handful would help her petition schools to reform education on consent.

Ultimately, [more than 6,500 anonymous women and girls from around Australia wrote in](#), sharing stories of harassment and sexual violence at parties, on the internet and elsewhere, with some survivors saying these experience haunted them into adulthood. The testimonies caught the attention of local media and officials, propelling Ms. Contos’s project into the spotlight.

She has tried to leverage her new prominence both in private meetings with lawmakers and publicly on social media, where she posts to a following of 20,000. “Just because you don’t think of your friend as sadistic,” one of her posts reads, “does not mean they did not rape someone.”

Ahead of a recent roundtable event that would bring together on Zoom survivors of sexual assault with Australian education officials, Ms. Contos paced around her kitchen trying to organize an agenda. “I feel like I’m doing a seating chart for a party,” she said. “Creating media releases — I don’t know how to make a media release!”

Though she lacks lobbying experience, she has a feel for making activism accessible for young people, many of whom, Ms. Contos says, have traditionally found it difficult to connect with politics.



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She counts among her supporters not just well-known figures like [Julia Gillard](#), [Australia's first female Prime Minister](#), but also young students who call her a role model.

“She’s very strong in her opinions and she won’t let anyone tear her down,” said Zoe, 18, a sexual assault survivor who requested her last name not be used because she is in legal proceedings.

Despite Ms. Contos’s nervousness before the video call, she judged the event a success.

“I just wanted policy and decision makers to remember that we’re making decisions for real people — very real 18-year-old girls,” she said. “There was an unanimous understanding that something had to change.”

Her advocacy has exacted a personal price: Though she and a team of volunteers have been careful to name only schools, rather than individuals in any allegations, she has received threats of defamation suits.

But those threats weigh on her less than the emotional exhaustion that comes with providing a forum for others to relive their sexual assault experiences.

Young men and boys have confessed to her on social media to being bystanders to sexual assaults — and even to being assailants.

Women have accused Ms. Contos's own friends of sexual assault, something she said she has needed therapy to process and has made her nervous to go home.

Then there is the constant pressure of public attention, and of wanting to capitalize on it to enact change.

But despite her exhaustion, she is organizing one last chance for sexual assault survivors to tell their stories to Australian education officials, ahead of a decision in November on whether consent will be mandatory in the new curriculum.

“Whatever the decision is, I need to take a step back,” she said, adding that she was so stressed that she had what she called a nervous breakdown weeks ago. (Still a student, she had a dissertation to finish.) Until then, she said, she is determined to do what she can, while she can, no matter the toll.

“I kept thinking: Just keep doing this now because it's going to go away suddenly and you want to make as much change as you can before it goes away,” Ms. Contos said. “But now — I don't think it's going to go away anymore.”