



Evidence Submission to Education Committee's Inquiry into Relationships & Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland

October 2024

Who we are

Alliance for Choice (AFC) are the largest grassroots campaign for abortion rights in Northern Ireland (NI) and were critical to abortion decriminalisation via both the 2018 United Nations CEDAW inquiry, the 2018 UK Supreme Court case and mobilising community support for the decriminalisation of abortion in NI in October 2019. We won the Liberty Long Walk to Freedom in 2017 and the Political Studies Association Campaign of the Year Award of 2018. We advocate for abortion rights, access and justice for women and pregnant people, in particular those most marginalised who continue to face barriers, including refugee and asylum seeking women, LGBTQI+ people and those in violent, abusive or controlling relationships. We are made up of people who have faced the full gamut of reproductive injustice in NI.

We provide direct support, advice and guidance for women and pregnant people in need of abortion healthcare - in particular those experiencing barriers. We provide education workshops to organisations and communities on abortion information, access and stigma. We advocate for abortion and reproductive rights at governmental, institutional and societal level, we lobby for full implementation of abortion legislation, including RSE commitments. We provide evidence and experience based, research on reproductive rights, engaging with media and civic society on abortion issues, organising and speaking at abortion and reproductive justice events and providing an alternative narrative to the anti choice lobby, who continue to press for reversal of the current legislation and operate 'clinics' in (NI). We also work strategically across the globe, knowledge-sharing with partners facing similar issues in their contexts.

International Human Rights Obligations

As evidenced by numerous UN level reports, including recommendations incorporated into domestic legislation, comprehensive RSE is a necessary part of promoting and enjoying reproductive rights.



Alliance for Choice would draw attention to the obligations of the UK to recognise reproductive rights as a specific human rights issue in international law. As a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UK is required to take action to ensure all women and girls can enjoy their full human rights, which under the Convention includes access to full sexual and reproductive rights and services.¹ The CEDAW Committee has clearly stated that the situation with regard to abortion legislation in Northern Ireland prior to 2019 constitutes a grave breach of women's human rights, and the recommendations from this Inquiry include introducing **mandatory, comprehensive and age appropriate relationship and sexuality education**, as well as ensuring access to comprehensive education on contraception, in addition to access to such contraception and safe and legal abortion.² This was repeated, with emphasis, in the Concluding Observations from the examination of the UK under CEDAW in 2019, which include a recommendation that **all recommendations made under the Inquiry are implemented without delay**.³

The UK has further emphasised its commitment to full sexual and reproductive rights in the Agreed Conclusions of the CSW 65 conference in 2021⁴, and in its commitment to the UN Generation Equality Forum initiative⁵, which includes a new global Action Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Rights. It should be emphasised that in its statement at the closing of CSW65, the UK stressed that action on the commitments made in the Agreed Conclusions also is required 'at home'⁶.

We would take this opportunity to share the obligation at both national and devolved government levels to deliver RSE. This stems from a 2019 piece of legislation⁷ that enshrined CEDAW recommendations into law, following decades of lobbying and legal

¹ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), article 12. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986.

² CEDAW Committee (2018) Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW

³ Concluding Observations 2019, 2013, 2008 on examinations of the UK under CEDAW

⁴ See UN Women press release 26 March 2021: 'UN's largest gathering on women's rights delivers robust blueprint on strengthening women's leadership and participation in public life'.

⁵ Generation Equality Forum blueprint for Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action

⁶ See UK statement to the closing ceremony of CSW65 in a video recording by UN WebTV; the UK statement begins at 0'22"00 of the recording.

⁷ Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/22/section/9>



challenges by the women's movement including Alliance for Choice. Following a significant period of over 3 years from the 2019 law change, regulations were brought forward by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023. These regulations amended the The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and placed requirement on the NI Department of Education to act before the 1st of January 2024, a deadline which has been missed, so that:-

“The curriculum for every grant-aided school shall, in relation to key stages 3 and 4, include age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.”⁸

This wording reflects the CEDAW recommendations that the UK Government:-

“Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory curriculum component for adolescents, covering early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation”⁹.

RSE mini-inquiry

Instead of implementation, 5 years on from the law change we are faced with a 'mini-inquiry'. We have also had a previous time consuming consultation exercise which we contend was unnecessary and flawed as it misframed the Rights of the Child focusing on parental opt out instead of framing RSE as a protective measure for young people.

The mini-inquiry survey asks for people's experiences of RSE at school. There are already numerous research reports already outlining the current situation of RSE in NI, drawing on both expert and lived experience, for example those by the NIHRC¹⁰ and the

⁸ The Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/602/regulation/2/made>

⁹ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#)

¹⁰ Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform <https://nihrc.org/publication/detail/nihrc-report-relationships-and-sexuality-education-in-post-primary-schools-in-northern-ireland-a-compelling-case-for-reform>



Belfast Youth Forum¹¹. Additionally the Women's Policy Group asked specific questions on RSE in their 2022 report¹² which highlighted that RSE is essential in combating the high levels of VAWG in NI. We cannot eradicate VAWG without adequate RSE in schools, which can also support cultural change in attitudes to sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture. We welcome the mention of consent in the mini-inquiry, RSE must include teaching on consent and healthy relationships. It is disappointing that 5 years on from the Gillen Review¹³, which made clear the need for a reform of RSE, we are still discussing the issue instead of implementing the legally obligated changes for young people.

The curriculum must include education on contraception and abortion. This is a legal requirement. We are disappointed that abortion has not been mentioned in the materials around the mini-inquiry. This is a missed opportunity to raise awareness that education on abortion is a legal requirement, and not an issue up for debate. The impetus to change the curriculum came from the monumental law change decriminalising abortion and children and young people must know their options and rights, as well as how to access them. As well as in school delivery, we would welcome outlines for plans on the regular updating of materials in the RSE hub.

Rather than retrofitting a flawed and limited curriculum, which still includes harmful and outdated 'abstinence' as a topic, we would urge the Department to develop a new curriculum that is inclusive, factual, and comprehensive adopting an intersectional approach. Only this will discharge the duty on the Department following the 2023 regulations and uphold the rights of children and young people.

We would note the RSE regulations include a commitment to a review of RSE delivery in January 2026. It is hard to see what there will be to review given the slow pace of change. We urge the Committee and Department to take action, every delay means another cohort of children and young people have been failed. We still regularly answer our helpline to young people who do not know enough about pregnancy and their cycles to be able to make informed decisions about their own reproductive lives. This is a

¹¹ Any Use? <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/youth-forum/any-use-report>

¹² Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland: NI Women's Policy Group Research Findings <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

¹³ The Gillen Review <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/gillen-review-report-law-and-procedures-serious-sexual-offences-ni>



direct outcome of the neglect of the Department of Education, despite their clear legal duty for reform.

Conclusion

We have had sight of and contributed to the Women's Policy Group response which we endorse. Finally we would express our disappointment that the women's sector broadly, and Alliance for Choice in particular, were not invited to contribute evidence to the Committee. The legal requirement to change how RSE is delivered would not have happened without our work, we are experts in this area. For our organisations not to be considered as 'stakeholders' is not only insulting it is detrimental to the work of the Committee and Department.

For more information please contact alliancechoice4@gmail.com