

Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Schools

Committee for Education

October 2024



1. Introduction

Women's Platform welcomes the opportunity to contribute evidence to this Inquiry. It is positive to see the Inquiry, as implementation of comprehensive, age appropriate and mandatory Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is urgent to improve not only the knowledge of young people around pregnancy, pregnancy prevention and abortion, but crucially strengthen the skills young people have in developing healthy and respectful relationships with all their peers, which is vital to create the conditions for positive, safe and consent based intimate relationships.

Women's Platform is a membership organisation working to promote the implementation of international human rights standards in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in line with commitments the UK has made to international human rights treaties. Established in 1988 as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women's Lobby, Women's Platform also represents women and girls in Northern Ireland at the European and international level, including at the UN. Women's Platform is in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN.

The work of Women's Platform locally focuses on building the capacity of members and the wider women's sector to utilise international human rights standards and mechanisms for women's rights in their own practice and work to promote gender equality in Northern Ireland. Women's Platform also shares evidence and good practice from international networks locally, and works with members to amplify the voice of women and girls in Northern Ireland internationally. In addition, Women's Platform contributes evidence to consultation processes and engages with policy and decision makers to highlight human rights commitments and evidence of good practice on realising gender equality.

Women's Platform was among the organisations instigating the Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under the Optional Protocol to CEDAW¹, and views implementing the recommendations of CEDAW in full as a clear roadmap and mechanism to ensuring women's human rights are fully met and upheld in Northern Ireland. This is also mandated in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019.

Women's Platform also respects and celebrates the right of everyone to define their own identity and applies this to all our work. The comments below are made in light of this.

¹ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#)

2. Endorsement

Women's Platform endorses the response of Women's Policy Group to this Inquiry.

3. International obligations and reproductive health and rights

The international human rights framework constitutes a crucial overarching context to this Inquiry, as the obligations of the UK to recognise reproductive rights as a specific human rights issue have been raised repeatedly across examinations under core Conventions. 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.² 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 abortion³. 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.⁴ Implementation of the recommendations has also been referenced in Concluding Observations of other UN human rights bodies, including by the Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the Committee against Torture.

The UK has further emphasised its commitment to full sexual and reproductive rights in the Agreed Conclusions of the CSW 65 conference in 2021⁵, and in its commitment to the UN Generation Equality Forum initiative⁶, 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'⁷.

It is essential to note that the Committee on the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), with the CEDAW Committee, has emphasised that using disability rights as an argument to oppose safe abortion is a misinterpretation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁸. The statement stresses that disability rights and gender equality are two components of the same human rights

² [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.

³ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#)

⁴ [Concluding Observations](#) 2019, 2013, 2008 on examinations of the UK under CEDAW

⁵ 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](#)',

⁶ Generation Equality Forum blueprint for [Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action](#)

⁷ 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.

⁸ CEDAW and CRPD Committees (August 2018). '[Guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights for all women, in particular women with disabilities](#)': Joint statement by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

standard that should not be construed as conflicting, and clarifies that States must take effective measures to enable women, including women with disabilities, to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and ensure that women have access to evidence-based and unbiased information in this regard. It also underlines as a critical issue that all women, including women with disabilities, are protected against forced abortion, contraception or sterilisation against their will or without their informed consent.

Specifically, the comment states that 'States parties should fulfill their obligations under articles 5 and 8 of CEDAW and CRPD Conventions respectively by addressing the root causes of discrimination against women and persons with disabilities. This includes challenging discriminatory attitudes and fostering respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, in particular women with disabilities, as well as providing support to parents of children with disabilities in this regard. Health policies and abortion laws that perpetuate deep-rooted stereotypes and stigma undermine women's reproductive autonomy and choice, and they should be repealed because they are discriminatory'.

Approaches to RSE in the UK and Ireland

In line with recommendations from CEDAW, RSE became mandatory in England in 2020, through the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019.⁹ Under this legislation, Relationships education is mandatory for primary school pupils, and RSE is compulsory at post primary level. Guidance issued in England has changed rapidly since the introduction of the legislation and there is no centrally agreed curriculum; however, a clear requirement is that all schools must have a policy, and that education is age appropriate. There is also no right for parents to withdraw children from Relationships education; parents do have that right for RSE until three terms before a young person turns 16, in which case the young person has the right to make their own decision. The guidance also encourages schools to discuss withdrawal requests with parents and seek to include all pupils, including pupils with special educational needs¹⁰.

In Scotland, RSE is not compulsory and there is also no statutory curriculum, but education is required to be inclusive and age appropriate. A consultation was undertaken in 2023 on new guidance, which builds on human rights principles, and requires provision to meet the rights of children and young people in line with the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Scottish education is to be inclusive of young people with special educational needs as well as LGBTI groups, and is known as Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood education, extending to parenthood education. Parents are entitled to withdraw children from sexual health elements of the curriculum, but the guidance encourages debate, including respectful debate on different viewpoints.¹¹

⁹ [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education \(England\) Regulations 2019](#)

¹⁰ Department of Education (2020) [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education: Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers](#)

¹¹ Scottish Government (2023) [Delivery of relationships, sexual health and parenthood education in Scottish schools: draft guidance](#)

In Wales, RSE is compulsory and parents cannot withdraw children from lessons. There is a statutory curriculum under The Curriculum for Wales – Relationships and Sexuality Education Code¹²; schools must demonstrate how they meet the aims set out in this guidance. Themes included in the guidance cover relationships; rights and equity; sex, gender and sexuality; bodies and body image; sexual health and well-being; and violence, safety and support, which are interwoven within the curriculum. The Welsh curriculum also requires RSE to be inclusive of LGBTI, based on human rights and appropriate to learner age.

Ireland is currently reviewing national curricula, and a review by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has recommended a single, comprehensive curriculum ‘with adequate time to teach it’. A new curriculum was introduced for the junior cycle of post primary schools in 2023, but primary and senior cycle curricula are still being developed and current teaching reflects guidance from 1999¹³. There is currently no firm guidance on the role of parents; the draft new guidance for junior cycle, however, emphasises an inclusive ethos and a focus on emotional wellbeing as well as confidence in relationships.

Across Europe, there is currently no single approach to RSE, and the new EU Directive on combating violence against women and girls¹⁴ also does not specify a curriculum, although it emphasises the importance of access to information. However, the European Women’s Lobby has developed core principles for feminist sexuality education¹⁵, which emphasise challenging hierarchical relationships in favour of an egalitarian approach where partners in an intimate relationship are equal, with equal rights and responsibilities for each others’ self determination, health and wellbeing, safety and enjoyment. The principles stress that addressing structural inequalities and gender inequalities is a vital element of effective and meaningful RSE that contributes to healthier relationships, as well as addressing sexual violence and harassment at the societal level. Specifically, the principles emphasise that the content of RSE curricula must be the same for girls and boys, to ensure these inequalities can be addressed and all young people have the opportunity to consider their own identities, preferences, concerns and attitudes to intimate relationships, sex and reproduction. This is also vital to address the different social conditioning of boys and girls, and effectively explore challenging attitudes and issues, including a rise in misogynistic attitudes among boys and young men.

It is clear from the brief overview above that there are significant differences in approaches to RSE across these islands, with no agreement on a rights based ethos, core elements or the rights of different stakeholders. This highlights the importance of comprehensive review of existing provisions in Northern Ireland, which demonstrate very significant divergence and create a situation where children and young people do not have uniform access to clear, factual, rights based and objective information, in line with the recommendations of the CEDAW Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland.

Curriculum integration and content

The new legislation already mandates scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. It is therefore important and welcome that this Inquiry explicitly seeks to identify

¹² [The Curriculum for Wales – Relationships and Sexuality Education Code](#)

¹³ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment website [update](#), last accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁴ [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

¹⁵ European Women’s Lobby (2020). [Feminist SEXuality Education](#)

links between RSE and different curriculum elements. In particular, it is vital to separately explore scientific information and moral and ethical considerations, both of which are relevant to the Northern Ireland curriculum.

Specifically, sexual and reproductive health is a health issue and therefore forms part of the curriculum in relation to health education. Young people need an understanding of how both male and female reproduction works, in order to be able to understand their bodies, which is vital from a health perspective particularly as they mature and get older, when risks for many conditions including several cancers increase. This understanding is also essential to enable young people to make autonomous decisions about their bodies throughout their lives, which is clearly set out as a right in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁶. This is relevant to the World Around US curriculum at primary level, and guidance examples from England, Scotland and Wales show a relevant focus on the correct names for body parts, personal hygiene, boundaries and developing healthy relationships with people around us. Young people in Key stage 3 and 4 also need an understanding of both how fertility works and how pregnancy can be prevented, as this forms part of understanding human biology, as well as modern and autonomous decision making. It has also concrete impacts on the lives of individuals and societies; for example, there is international evidence that many young adults do not understand fertility and may not be able to make informed decisions about when to start families, should they wish to do so. Contraception has been available as mainstream healthcare for several decades, and access to information on 'family planning' is clearly set out as a right in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)¹⁷, which also confirm the right of women to determine the 'number and spacing of children', and to have access to full reproductive healthcare as part of this. In short, the importance and significance of reproductive and sexual health education goes significantly beyond the mechanics of intercourse, having or preventing pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases, and this Inquiry must understand the implications for stable, healthy and sustainable societies.

This knowledge is vital for all young people, as everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, has both a right to understand their own bodies and a responsibility to make sure that their sexual activity is as safe as possible and results in a pregnancy only at a time they actively choose it. This also remains a health and human rights issue; reproductive health is complex in particular for women, and girls must have access to information that allows them to recognise warning signs at an early stage. In addition, contraception and prevention of pregnancy is the responsibility of all involved in sexual activity, and therefore all young people need to have access to contraceptives and understand both their responsibility in using them and how they work to both prevent pregnancy and protect against infections. This is not a gendered issue; rather, the traditional approach emphasising contraception only to young women specifically oversimplifies understanding of boys' and men's reproductive health, as well as perpetuating unhelpful stereotypes as men having no reproductive responsibility. This not only contributes to risky behaviours, as well as misogynistic practices such as stealthing, but also limits the ability of boys and men to understand biology, and make informed and autonomous decisions about their role in starting families, and supporting and caring for children and families.

¹⁶ [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC, 1989)

¹⁷ [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW, 1979), article 12.

However, young women have the additional right and need to know about contraceptive choices available to them, as male contraceptives are limited and different options suit different women, which is often poorly understood and creates health issues as well as unnecessary mental and emotional strain for many women. Abortion is appropriate in this context as part of a continuum of choice and healthcare, as a procedure available to end a pregnancy where this is the wish of the pregnant person, where the foetus has a fatal abnormality and the pregnant person prefers an abortion, or where the health of the pregnant person is at risk from continuing the pregnancy. These are clearly key elements of the curriculum, and are scientific, fact based issues that have a place alongside the overall curriculum on biology, as well as PDMU and Learning for Life and Work.

Relationship education is equally a core element of the curriculum, and must be integrated in a scientific, fact based way as an application of psychology. Healthy relationships are essential to enable a more equal, respectful society based on equality and respect for all, to keep young people safe, and build young people's capacity to approach intimate relationships with confidence. Current evidence indicates that lack of understanding of healthy relationships means that young people are not necessarily prepared for either intimate or sexual relationships, and that both boys and girls may experience pressurising, being exploited, harassed and forced into situations and activities they are not consenting to or ready for^{18 19}. Evidence from a new study in Northern Ireland shows that girls are more likely than boys to experience harassment and non consensual sexual activity²⁰, which also underlines that young people's understanding of healthy boundaries and responsibilities are missing or blurred. Simultaneously, recent high profile cases of sexual abuse and inappropriate conduct show that boys are at specific risk from predatory men and criminals engaging in sextortion, and often have very limited power in such situations with suicides reported in a number of cases²¹. New conversations, focused on consent and autonomous decision making, are needed to support all young people stay safe and have the capacity to engage in respectful, mutually supportive relationships as well as effectively address violence, harassment and abuse.

The moral and ethical considerations around relationships, contraception and abortion are complex and can be viewed through a number of lenses, including religious and cultural norms. While it is fully appropriate to discuss these issues as part of encouraging critical thinking and philosophical reflection, teachers' role is not to make judgements on behalf of students; this is directly in contravention to good practice in all other areas of the curriculum, and does not fit alongside science based education. However, consideration of relationships is central to RE, and can also be integrated into English and literacy, in the context of analysing literary works and communicating effectively with others.

The appropriate approach is for teachers to present arguments within their full context, including highlighting where a particular position is informed by specific ideology or philosophy, and encourage and enable open debate on the issues. This is explicitly clarified for example in guidance developed for teachers delivered the new 2019

¹⁸ Palmer, M, Clarke, C, Ploubidis, G & Wellings, K (2019) Prevalence and correlates of 'sexual competence' at first heterosexual intercourse among young people in Britain. In *British Medical Journal Sexual and Reproductive Health* vol 45, issue 2. Available at <https://srh.bmj.com/content/45/2/127>.

¹⁹ Ofsted (2021) [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#)

²⁰ Purdy, N., Ballentine, M., Lyle, H., Orr, K., Symington, E., Webster, D., York, L., (2023) [Growing Up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report](#). Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College / Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

²¹ See eg. *The Guardian* 6 June 2024 '[Parents criticise 'unforgivable' delays by Meta in son's sextortion death case](#)'

curriculum in England, by the Institute of Education at University College London; this guidance also underlines that discussions about morality are not relevant to the science based curriculum, which must be focused on facts in a rights based environment²². However, it is understood that pupils are likely to bring questions that can be challenging, and it is vital that resources are provided for schools and teachers to support open, non judgemental and inclusive discussion. Such resources should be relevant across the curriculum, to ensure that moral and ethical considerations can be discussed as part of all subjects integrating elements of RSE, and not necessarily focused within RE.

It is important that this element of the curriculum is rights based, and is in line with international human rights standards, in particular the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but also including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)²³ and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)²⁴. These frameworks set out internationally agreed human rights standards, which set requirements for UN member states' legislation, and therefore can be viewed as a baseline for ethical discussion. This does not exclude discussion of moral and philosophical perspectives, for example on when life begins, but provides a context for such discussions. It is important to note that guidance on CEDAW notes that there are limits to healthcare providers' right to conscientious objection, while the expert Committees monitoring CEDAW and CRPD have clearly stated that abortion does not breach the rights of disabled people, where it is the informed choice of the pregnant person²⁵.

Policy implementation and school compliance

Women's Platform is a policy focused organisation and will therefore respond to this issue in general terms, within the framework of the CEDAW Inquiry recommendations, which state that RSE should be mandatory and age appropriate, and supported by clear guidance.

Against this framework, it is clear that sharing information about the curriculum with parents is appropriate as a mechanism for supporting meaningful engagement of parents and families with schools. However, this is a general requirement, and parents and carers have the right to a broad context of information across the syllabus of all subjects. Teaching on sexual and reproductive health and rights forms part of health education, and therefore falls fully within the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, which means there is no requirement for any additional or specific information to be shared with parents. There is no need to treat RSE as specifically sensitive, and doing so risks further stigmatising this curriculum in ways that young people have previously found unhelpful.²⁶ This is also in line with guidance on implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasises that young people under 18 are rights holders independent of their parents, carers and guardians, and have a right to access information designed to promote their 'social, spiritual and moral well-being and

²² Jenkinson, A et al (2021) [Good practice guide for teaching relationships and sex\(uality\) education](#). London: UCL.

²³ [Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](#) (CRPD, 2006)

²⁴ [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (CERD, 1967)

²⁵ CEDAW and CRPD Committees (August 2018). ['Guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights for all women, in particular women with disabilities': Joint statement by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\) and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)

²⁶ Belfast Youth Forum, Common Youth and Queen's University Belfast (2019) [Any Use?](#)

physical and mental health' (Article 17). The Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that this is vital to enable States Parties to put in place cost effective legislation, policies and programmes relating to health, such as family planning, protection against harmful practices and use of harmful substances.²⁷

The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 sets out what the current, legally mandated curriculum is, and therefore it is sufficient to make reference to this in information to parents, as it is for all other subjects. However, it is important to explore to what extent schools have implemented the newest legislation within policies, and it would be helpful to commission a comprehensive review of this to get a full picture, and ensure all children and young people have access to the same level of objective and accurate information.

Legislative and Rights-Based Considerations

The focus of all education is to ensure young people have the knowledge, information and skills to make autonomous and positive decisions about their own life²⁸. The existing legislative framework is based on this core assumption, which also is the focus of teacher training and schools' core ethos. In this light, the framing of much of discussion to date around parents' rights requires reassessment, as it directly contravenes this core role and remit of schools and is likely to cause confusion for pupils and challenges for teachers.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that children and young people have the right to comprehensive education across the curriculum, as well as the right to have a say in decisions that affect them and have this view taken seriously. In addition, guidance by the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressly supports the right of young people to access both education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and a comprehensive package of reproductive health care services including contraceptives and where necessary, abortion. General Comment 4²⁹ also states that young people have a right to be heard with regard to reproductive health, and that young people of sufficient maturity must be allowed to make their own decisions, with parents informed that this is in the best interests of the child.

The focus of schools, in relation to RSE as all other subjects, must be focused on ensuring all pupils have access to the full curriculum, while managing parental expectations through clear information. In this context, RSE is in no sense controversial or different from other subjects: understanding the body, how it works and how healthy relationships can support healthy lives is vital for young people's long term health and wellbeing. As noted above, it is also vital to foster healthy relationships within society more generally, to promote health and enable equality, and tackle major harms in society arising from inequalities and lack of relationship skills, such as violence against women and girls and racial, homophobic and transphobic abuse and bullying.^{30 31} In this regard, comprehensive RSE has been found to

²⁷ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) [General Comment 4: Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

²⁸ Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2023) [Curriculum aims and objectives](#)

²⁹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) [General Comment 4: Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

³⁰ Crowther-Dowey, C., Gillespie, T., Hopkins, K. (2016). Building Healthy Relationships for Young People and the Prevention of Domestic Abuse. In: Hilder, S., Bettinson, V. (eds) Domestic Violence. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52452-2_8

³¹ Rogers, M., Rumley, T. & Lovatt, G. The *Change Up* Project: Using Social Norming Theory with Young People to Address Domestic Abuse and Promote Healthy Relationships. *J Fam Viol* **34**, 507–519 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-0026-9>

reduce violence in young people's relationships, as well as increase responsible use of contraception.³²

In addition to promoting autonomous decision making, ensuring young people have the knowledge and skills to exercise their right to decide on when and how to be sexually active, as well as when to have children, is vital to ensure children are born into relationships where they are wanted and parents have the ability and capacity to support them. This is critical as part of efforts to address poverty and prevent child poverty, which are key risk factors for poorer life outcomes. Unplanned pregnancies are more likely to occur in population groups with limited access to information and support, including contraception, and increase the likelihood of long term poverty for mothers in particular, as caring responsibilities limit job opportunities particularly at the lower pay and skills end of the labour market³³. This, in turn, is directly associated with child poverty.

Training for teachers is vital to ensure teachers are skilled and comfortable to deliver the curriculum. There is considerable evidence that teachers across the UK currently do not feel confident in teaching the curriculum^{34 35}, and it is notable that as many as three quarters of schools outsource RSE to external providers³⁶. Furthermore, evidence from Ireland as long ago as 2005 suggests that male teachers find teaching RSE particularly challenging³⁷, which highlights the need for appropriately tailored training to ensure both male and female teachers can participate, which in turn is vital to ensure young people can have both male and female perspectives on RSE, as relevant.

A recent review of current RSE teaching in Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission stresses that RSE teaching does not meet human rights standards, due to gaps in the legal and policy framework, materials that are not comprehensive and inclusive and sometimes outdated, and uneven coverage of issues such as abortion, contraception, gender and sexual orientation. The study particularly stresses the need for standardised resources that are inclusive of all genders, as well as young people with disabilities and special needs.³⁸ This is vital, as disabled people, and in particular disabled women and girls, are at greater risk of abuse and exploitation than the

³² See eg. Wolfe, D, Crooks, C & Jaffe, P (2009). A School-Based Program to Prevent Adolescent Dating Violence: A Cluster Randomized Trial. In *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2009;163(8):692-699. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/381903>

³³ Whitaker R, Hendry M, Aslam R, Booth A, Carter B, Charles JM, Craine N, Tudor Edwards R, Noyes J, Ives Ntambwe L, Pasterfield D, Rycroft-Malone J, Williams N. Intervention Now to Eliminate Repeat Unintended Pregnancy in Teenagers (INTERUPT): a systematic review of intervention effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, and qualitative and realist synthesis of implementation factors and user engagement. In *Health Technol Assess*. 2016 Feb;20(16):1-214. doi: [10.3310/hta20160](https://doi.org/10.3310/hta20160)

³⁴ Cumper, Peter; Adams, Sarah; Onyejekwe, Kerry and O'Reilly, Michelle (2023). Teachers' perspectives on relationships and sex education lessons in England. In *Sex Education* (Early access). <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/14681811.2023.2171382>

³⁵ NSPCC press release 28 September 2022 '[Half of secondary school teachers don't feel confident delivering sex and relationships education](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/press-releases/2022/09/28/half-of-secondary-school-teachers-dont-feel-confident-delivering-sex-and-relationships-education/)'

³⁶ See eg. the training provider [Love for Life](https://www.loveforlife.org.uk/), which according to its website provides sessions in over 75% of post primary schools in Northern Ireland (site last accessed 6 November 2023).

³⁷ Mannix McNamara, P, Geary, T & Jourdan, D (2011). Gender implications of the teaching of relationships and sexuality education for health-promoting schools. In *Health Promotion International*, Volume 26, Issue 2, June 2011, Pages 230–237, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daq046>

³⁸ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (June 2023) [Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform](https://www.nihrc.org.uk/publications/relationships-and-sexuality-education-in-post-primary-schools-in-northern-ireland-a-compelling-case-for-reform/)

population as a whole^{39 40 41}, while LGBTQI+ young people experience significant mental health issues, with associated risks including abuse, exploitation, health risks and a significantly higher risk of suicide than young people overall^{42 43 44}. Therefore, it is vital that all young people have access to inclusive and comprehensive RSE, which builds on consent and takes account of the needs of young people in all their diversity. This is also important to support all young people develop an understanding of the complexities of gender and sexual identities⁴⁵, which encourages an open attitude and can significantly support all young people deal with the challenges of developing their own identities, while contributing to tackling discrimination⁴⁶. Crucially, this understanding must be integrated throughout the curriculum and taught to all pupils, to promote an understanding of the diversity and range of gender and sexual identities among all young people, taking into account the fluidity of young people's identities and the importance of exploring this in a safe and supportive environment.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission study recommends updating the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007⁴⁷ to meet CEDAW requirements, improving schools' capacity to teach RSE and monitoring of delivery⁴⁸. This guidance provides a significant opportunity to prepare this, as a priority action for a future Education Minister and Executive. While an update is necessary to meet the CEDAW requirement of comprehensive RSE⁴⁹ and the recommendation from the Inquiry under the Optional Protocol to CEDAW⁵⁰. It is also required in the light of significant cultural change

³⁹ Tomsa R, Gutu S, Cojocaru D, Gutiérrez-Bermejo B, Flores N, Jenaro C. Prevalence of Sexual Abuse in Adults with Intellectual Disability: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. In *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021 Feb 18;18(4):1980. doi: [10.3390/ijerph18041980](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041980)

⁴⁰ Zarintaj A, Malihi, Janet L, Fanslow, Ladan Hashemi, Pauline J, Gulliver, Tracey K.D, McIntosh, Prevalence of Nonpartner Physical and Sexual Violence Against People With Disabilities. In *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 61, Issue 3, 2021, Pages 329-337. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2021.03.016>

⁴¹ Mónica Miriam García-Cuéllar, Guadalupe Pastor-Moreno, Isabel Ruiz-Pérez & Jesús Henares-Montiel (2023) The prevalence of intimate partner violence against women with disabilities: a systematic review of the literature. In *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 45:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/09638288.2022.2025927](https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2022.2025927)

⁴² Sepúlveda M, Patterson CJ. LGBTQI Youths Today—New Knowledge, Better Understanding. In *JAMA Pediatr*. 2021;175(8):769–770. doi: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.0893

⁴³ Wilson, C., Cariola, L.A. LGBTQI+ Youth and Mental Health: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Research. In *Adolescent Res Rev* 5, 187–211 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00118-w>.

⁴⁴ Mattia Marchi, Elisa Arcolin, Gianluca Fiore, Antonio Travascio, Daniele Uberti, Francesco Amadeo, Manlio Converti, Andrea Fiorillo, Massimo Mirandola, Federica Pinna, Antonio Ventriglio, Gian Maria Galeazzi & Italian Working Group on LGBTIQ Mental Health (2022) Self-harm and suicidality among LGBTIQ people: a systematic review and meta-analysis. In *International Review of Psychiatry*, 34:3-4, 240-256, DOI: [10.1080/09540261.2022.2053070](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2022.2053070)

⁴⁵ John P. Elia PhD & Mickey J. Eliason PhD (2010) Dangerous Omissions: Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage School-Based Sexuality Education and the Betrayal of LGBTQ Youth, *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 5:1, 17-35, DOI: [10.1080/15546121003748848](https://doi.org/10.1080/15546121003748848)

⁴⁶ Anderson, Katherine; Rossi, Talia; and Roth, Stella (2021) "Beyond the Birds and the Bees: Sex Education and its Impact on Communication, Self-Efficacy, and Relationships." In *SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 5, Article 14. Available at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol5/iss1/14>

⁴⁷ [Education \(Curriculum Minimum Content\) Order \(NI\) 2007](#)

⁴⁸ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (June 2023) [Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform](#)

⁴⁹ [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.

⁵⁰ CEDAW Committee (2018) [Inquiry into abortion legislation in Northern Ireland under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW](#)

since the Order, including in particular the advent of social media and associated new media for exploitation and abuse, which increases both young people's exposure to harmful sexual content and risk of exploitation.

Consent based education and Gillen Review recommendations

The core duty of schools is to equip children and young people with the skills, knowledge and understanding required in adult life, and this is fully in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Similarly, principles of education include a focus on young people encountering a number of ideas and perspectives, and building young people's skills to experience challenges, work with others and think critically⁵¹. From this perspective alone, it is clear that effective RSE is a major tool for addressing sexual violence and harassment, as a harmful practice and a specific form of violence against women and girls. There is also significant evidence that consent is poorly understood in society overall⁵², with many men and boys demonstrating maladaptive understanding⁵³, including beliefs that consent is not always required. The proliferation of sharing intimate images without consent of those pictured or those receiving images further demonstrates the lack of understanding, and potentially disregard for consent among men in particular. Therefore schools provide a highly relevant mechanism for introducing consent as a basic concept of equitable, healthy and rights based relationships.

Consent based education is vital, as consent is complex and a consent based approach to relationships requires a renewed attitude based on mutual respect, continuous communication and understanding of autonomous decision making. A modern, consent based definition of rape has been introduced in law in Sweden, Finland and many central European countries in recent years; for example England and Wales as well as Ireland include lack of consent as a criterion of rape and sexual assault and have long done so⁵⁴; however, a crucial issue in the latter is that extant law focuses on reasonable belief that consent was obtained, which allows for significant interpretation rather than focusing on securing positive consent. It is disappointing that the recently adopted EU Directive on Violence against Women and Girls⁵⁵ does not endorse a consent based definition of rape; however, the Directive does criminalise non consensual sharing of intimate images, which as noted above is also closely intertwined with the issue of consent.

The Gillen Review sets out clear recommendations for the Department of Education and schools, to introduce education on rape myths and essentially all key elements of RSE, as well as on the criminal justice process. Meanwhile, the CEDAW Inquiry report clearly requires the Executive to introduce comprehensive, age appropriate and mandatory RSE, including consent based education. This is, in itself, a sufficient mandate for doing so, as both reports are based on extensive engagement with relevant bodies, organisations and people affected by sexual violence and lack of access to abortion. However, more recent evidence also indicates that updated RSE curricula are needed to address current patterns

⁵¹ Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2023) [Curriculum aims and objectives](#)

⁵² Wignall, L, Stirling, J & (2022) [UK university students' perceptions and negotiations of sexual consent](#). In [Psychology & Sexuality](#) Volume 13, 2022 - Issue 3.

⁵³ Willis, M & Marcantonio, T (2023). [Sexual consent norms in a cross-sectional national sample of the UK](#). In *Journal of Public Health*, Volume 45, Issue 1, March 2023, Pages 84–90,

⁵⁴ Uhnnoo, S, Erixon, S & Bladini, M (2024). [The wave of consent-based rape laws in Europe](#). In [International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice](#) Volume 77, June 2024, 100668.

⁵⁵ [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

of sexual violence and harassment, in particular misogynistic abuse and violence against women and girls.

Recently launched research by Stranmillis University College⁵⁶ and research commissioned by The Executive Office to support development of the Ending Violence against Women and Girls strategy⁵⁷ show that a significant proportion of young people, in particular girls, experience online sexual harassment and violence, and many feel it is simply part of everyday life, as this is so normalised. In addition, information online varies in quality and accuracy, and scientifically accurate RSE is essential to enable young people to discern reliable and accurate information from misinformation. Such misinformation includes, for example, the imagery of women presented on pornographic sites and the kind of misogynistic approach advocated by so called men's rights activists and social media influencers who believe that women are inferior to men and their role is to be subservient, men are entitled to sex when they want it, 'no means yes', and so on. The research by Stranmillis University College⁵⁸ highlights the impact of social media influencers in particular, noting that a noticeable proportion of boys aged 12-17 expressed a positive view of the TikToker Andrew Tate, who came to prominence in 2022 through highlighting these messages. Girls, meanwhile, expressed negative views; these views of local young people further underline the importance of effective education in school and at home to counteract such discriminatory and violent attitudes.

Mechanisms for implementing comprehensive RSE

It is recognised that consent is complex, and therefore it is essential to update the curriculum and introduce new resources, explicitly reflecting consent as well as the requirements set in both the Gillen Review and the CEDAW Inquiry report. It is essential that this is undertaken in collaboration with schools, teachers and expert organisations, in order to ensure an age appropriate, meaningful and accessible curriculum that supports young people's health and wellbeing, while contributing to a more equal society focused on respect for all.

Queen's University Belfast has developed the If I Were Jack programme, which is aimed in particular at boys and young men, and seeks to explore masculinities and traditional gender roles, which locate responsibility for contraception and preventing pregnancy with girls and women. An early evaluation of its efficacy indicates that this approach is promising for young men, encouraging increased use of effective contraception and changing attitudes⁵⁹. NSPCC has also developed comprehensive lesson plans, building on the English curriculum, while youth organisations locally also have significant resources

⁵⁶ Purdy, N., Ballentine, M., Lyle, H., Orr, K., Symington, E., Webster, D., York, L., (2023) [Growing Up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report](#). Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College / Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

⁵⁷ McAlister, S; Schubotz, S and Templeton, M (September 2023) '[It's Just What Happens](#)'. Belfast: The Executive Office.

⁵⁸ Purdy, N., Ballentine, M., Lyle, H., Orr, K., Symington, E., Webster, D., York, L., (2023) [Growing Up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report](#). Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College / Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

⁵⁹ Lohan, M et al (2023) School-based relationship and sexuality education intervention engaging adolescent boys for the reductions of teenage pregnancy: the JACK cluster RCT. In *Health Technology Assessment*, 11 (8) pp. 1-139. [10.3310/YWXQ8757](#).

relevant to inclusive, comprehensive RSE. Resources such as this should be utilised in the new Northern Ireland curriculum, as engagement of boys in the issues of reproductive responsibility and health is vital for healthy outcomes for all young people.

Finally, the 2007 Order content needs to be reviewed, and this Inquiry also provides an opportunity to initiate this process. In particular the focus on marriage and abstinence appears now outdated, and abstinence based sex education has also been shown to be ineffective in reducing sexual activity among young people^{60 61}. Some studies suggest that abstinence based models in fact can contribute to issues such as early pregnancy⁶² and high levels of sexually transmitted infections among young people⁶³, including through shame, stigma and lack of information. From a health and wellbeing perspective alone, it is therefore vital that young people have access to information on safe sex for all genders. Comprehensive information and education is also associated with higher levels of self efficacy^{64 65}, which is a core component in making decisions about when and how to initiate sexual activity, and can encourage young people to make mature decisions based on their own readiness. This, in turn, is vital for reducing the risk for coercion and pressure into activities a young person is not ready for, which is a key factor in early and unwanted pregnancy, as well as unprotected intercourse and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections.

Conclusion: RSE as a mechanism for supporting healthy people and a healthy society

The core message of this submission is that RSE is vital not only for young people's health and wellbeing, but also for the wellbeing of society overall. Implementing RSE in line with existing legislation and recommendations, including international human rights frameworks, offers a way for Northern Ireland to develop a leading edge curriculum, while giving all young people the strongest possible start in life. As mandated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and CEDAW, focus must be on engaging young people and respecting their rights to education, information and autonomous decision making, rather than parental decision making. However, parents do have the right to have information on the syllabus, and it would be helpful for schools to engage parents in education and information sharing, to support wider debate and enable families to engage critically and openly with the issues. This is important for transparency, and also to enable parents to follow up on any and all of the issues covered within the curriculum at home.

⁶⁰ Heels, Sonja W. (2019) "The Impact of Abstinence-Only Sex Education Programs in the United States on Adolescent Sexual Outcomes," In *Perspectives*: Vol. 11, Article 3. Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol11/iss1/3>.

⁶¹ Carr, J & Packham, A (2017) The Effects of State-Mandated Abstinence-Based Sex Education on Teen Health Outcomes. In *Health Economics*, Volume 26, Issue 4, Pages 403-420. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.3315>

⁶² Stanger-Hall KF, Hall DW (2011) Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S. *PLoS ONE* 6(10): e24658. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0024658>.

Hogben M, Chesson H, Aral SO. Sexuality education policies and sexually transmitted disease rates in the United States of America. *International Journal of STD & AIDS*. 2010;21(4):293-297. doi:[10.1258/ijsa.2010.009589](https://doi.org/10.1258/ijsa.2010.009589)⁶³

⁶⁴ Rebecca Nurgitz, Rebecca A. Pacheco, Charlene Y. Senn, and Karen L. Hobden (2021). [The impact of sexual education and socialization on sexual satisfaction, attitudes, and self-efficacy](#). In *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 2021 30:2, 265-277.

⁶⁵ Anderson, Katherine; Rossi, Talia; and Roth, Stella (2021) "Beyond the Birds and the Bees: Sex Education and its Impact on Communication, Self-Efficacy, and Relationships." In *SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 5, Article 14. Available at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol5/iss1/14>

Where parents have a concern, the appropriate balancing of children's and parents' rights is already implemented in schools through complaints procedures and safeguarding policies.

It is important to note that the opt out provision currently integrated in RSE policy goes against the CEDAW Inquiry recommendation for mandatory RSE, and therefore is in contravention with The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, which codifies a requirement to implement all recommendations of the Inquiry in full. The focus of this Inquiry should be on ensuring as close alignment with existing primary legislation as possible, and guidance to schools should be clear on the provisions in primary legislation.