

# Women's Policy Group NI

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

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## **1. Introduction:**

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

The WPG is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBTQ+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG is endorsed as a coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level.

If you have any questions or queries about this response, or would like to discuss this evidence further with the WPG, please contact Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist at [elaine.crory@wrda.net](mailto:elaine.crory@wrda.net)

This response was prepared by the following WPG members:

- Elaine Crory – Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Meghan Hoyt - Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Jonna Monaghan, Women's Platform
- Emma Campbell - Alliance for Choice

Please note that this response also includes evidence from other WPG work, compiled by a range of WPG members, and not all member organisations have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in this response.

### 1.1 Endorsements

The WPG would like to endorse the response submitted to this call for evidence by:

- The Rainbow Project
- Alliance for Choice
- Women's Platform

## **2. Past Consultations Responses, Evidence Submissions and Briefings:**

The WPG has published a wide range of evidence through various evidence submissions, public consultation responses and specific briefings on issues relating

to Relationships and Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland. Responses made by the WPG, and some of our members, in relation to these issues include:

- WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan (2021)<sup>1</sup>
- Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland: NI Women's Policy Group Research Findings (2022)<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Evidence for the Inquiry**

#### **3.1 Violence Against Women and Girls**

As illustrated above, the WPG has done extensive primary research and written several consultation responses and briefings on issues relating to RSE, specifically, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). The argument underpinning all of this work remains the same:

Standardised, comprehensive RSE is essential to tackling VAWG in our society. It is one of the key root causes of VAWG and has a powerful role to play in preventing VAWG and shifting the cultural attitudes and norms that have allowed VAWG to continue at such widespread levels. We cannot eradicate VAWG without adequate RSE in schools.

Our primary research showed that:

- 92% of people who attended school in Northern Ireland said they did not feel they had received an adequate relationships and sexuality education (RSE)<sup>3</sup>
- 87% of women in Northern Ireland have experienced VAWG<sup>4</sup>
- 95% of women think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions<sup>5</sup>

The importance of education in tackling VAWG emerged as a key theme in our primary research into the scope, scale and prevalence of VAWG in 2022. In this report, we explain that:

Looking at both our qualitative and quantitative findings, the importance of education stood out as a key recurring theme. This was particularly the case when looking specifically at questions relating to culture, attitudes and beliefs around

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<sup>1</sup> WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan (2021). Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> WPG NI Violence Against Women and Girls Report (2022). Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> WPG (2021) 'Putting Women's Voices at the Core: Primary Research' Available here: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Research-Report-Womens-Voices-at-the-Core.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/AfterViolenceWPGPrimaryResearch.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

violence against women and girls.

In questions 15, 17 and 21, we asked respondents what they thought were the root causes of sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture, why they thought there is stigma around issues relating to violence against women and girls what sort of measures they thought were necessary to change men and boys' actions. For each of these questions, education was one of the most commonly cited responses. Specifically, a high level of respondents felt that:

- Sexism, misogyny, victim-blaming, rape myths and rape culture are caused by a lack of education.
- A lack of education on violence against women and girls has perpetuated the existence of stigma around issues relating to this violence.
- In order to change men and boys' actions and address men's violence, it is necessary to educate men and boys on issues relating to violence against women and girls. Many respondents specified that this education should begin at a young age in schools and other learning environments.

The importance of education was also a recurring theme when analysing the data from several quantitative questions. For example, we asked respondents if they were aware of various forms of violence against women and girls. Notably, less than 50% were aware of honour-based abuse (37.8%), systemic violence by the state (36.7%) and spiritual abuse (26%). Only 54.3% were aware of all the forms of violence that we listed.

This kind of evidence illustrates the issues that women and girls face when coming to terms with abuse that they experience; it is difficult to process these experiences when they cannot be named, let alone to report them. Again and again, historical scandals are revealed to have happened decades ago, and when the public wonder what the delay is, and when the justice system struggles to find a route to proper justice, it is because the type of violence that these people experienced was simply not spoken about or acknowledged at the time - sometimes even by the survivors.

Furthermore, a high proportion of respondents indicated that they were 'unsure' about the existence of various types of violence against women and girls, particularly in relation to culture, attitudes and beliefs. For example:

- 16.9% of respondents were unsure about whether Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture.
- 15.5% of respondents were unsure about whether there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls.
- 11% of respondents were unsure if Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming.
- 9.5% of respondents were unsure if Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny.

This suggests that more education may be needed on these key concepts, such

as rape myths, rape culture, stigma, victim-blaming, sexism and misogyny. This could be done through incorporating these topics into school curriculums or delivering a widespread public education campaign, and ideally, both.

The following quotes provide a sample of responses we received to our survey in 2021 in response to the question: *Did you attend school in Northern Ireland and if so, do you feel that you received an adequate Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)? Could you please explain your reasons for this?*

*"Love for Life are not equipped to deliver RSE - yes they ticked PHA boxes by attending courses to be trained but this is not reflected in their workshops. Faith based and Public Health do not mix and when they do, they do so to the detriment of our young people"*

*"Simply not good enough any more. Needs to be led by the children who are being taught. Not education sector or churches."*

*"Comprehensive & standardised RSE should be introduced immediately and parents should not have the option to object."*

*"I was trained to deliver RSE. Did so with my classes. Never extended to whole year groups. Boys very rarely taught RSE. Mostly taught basics in Science only."*

*"RSE should be mandatory, delivered in all schools and faith or other schools should not be exempted or allowed to teach this according to their own perceptions. Experts in this should set the curriculum for all schools."*

*"...Children now are exposed to sexualised content in many forms and it may all appear 'normal. They need to be taught about the very strong emotions it brings and how to say no to sex if they are not ready rather than be talked into it by their partner."*

*"Fairly primitive compared to other jurisdictions. Not mandatory. Not inclusive. Subject to 'religious' ethos of school. Does not fit children and young people for life and is not seen as critical to changing attitudes to women and girls."*

*"No separation from faith in most schools which means many young people are not enabled to take part in discourse which would afford them proper insights or to make well informed decisions. Too much alignment with religious views."*

*"There should be comprehensive and compulsory education not only on the biology of reproduction but on relationships and consent."*

*"Our 'education for life' teacher was an RE teacher and then music. It was painful and uncomfortable for us as students and teachers. You were basically told just to abstain which is not helpful."*

*"It's unacceptable that young people are still kept in the dark and it is worse when there is a creationist/religious side to the teaching of it."*

*"It doesn't start young enough and isn't comprehensive enough. It should be taught as a set of facts. "Gay people exist" "your body is your own" "no means no" etc."*

*"It is not fit for purpose, even for straight people. I went to a grammar school and it was not adequate education on this topic."*

*"As a teacher I feel it is not taken seriously enough. Too many people in N.I are afraid to tackle these subjects and worry about parents reaction."*

*"LGBTQIA+ needs more identification. Religion cannot rule our sex education anymore."*

*"Sexual education should be discussed in every year from p1 to Upper sixth not just when a child starts puberty."*

*"Religion has no place in schools and certainly should not shape something as important as sex ed."*

*"It is out of date and far too orthodox. RSE needs to be open and honest."*

*"It is heavily influenced by religion and only teaches abstinence."*

*"Totally inadequate."*

*"Should be made compulsory to educate girls and boys."*

*"It is not taught in real life situations. Its all science and textbooks."*

*"Outdated and based on religion, needs to be open minded and more broadened."*

*"I don't ever remember learning about this outside of my church growing up."*

*"It needs to be comprehensive. Abstinence is not a good sex education."*

*"It's needs to be lgbt inclusive."*

*"It's a disgrace!"*

We are concerned that the RSE curriculum must remain flexible and adaptable to enable schools to address emerging issues. Writing this in November 2023, it is a mistake not to include within the Minimum Content Order issues such as online harassment and abuse, including Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) and online misogyny. We know this is a real issue for young people; in recent research it was one of two major issues raised in focus groups<sup>6</sup> and so for it to be absent from the minimum content order is an oversight. At a time when we know that online influencers are having a real influence on young people's perception of what is

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<sup>6</sup> McAllister, Schubotz Templeton and Neill *It's Just What Happens: Girls and Young Women's Views and Experiences of Violence in Northern Ireland*, Queens University Belfast and The Executive Office <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/its-just-what-happens.pdf> p.8

healthy and acceptable in relationships - for example recent research by Women's Aid showed that "children and young people exposed to misogynistic social media content like Andrew Tate were almost 5x more likely than those not exposed to view hurting someone physically as acceptable if you say sorry afterwards"<sup>7</sup>. It is quite evidently vital that teachers are equipped to respond to these things in real time. It is therefore essential to ensure that there is a policy to continually review and update materials and that every effort is made to make the policy a "living document".

We have demonstrated time and time again through primary research and other written evidence submissions that RSE in Northern Ireland is currently extremely inadequate and is contributing to the continued prevalence of VAWG. These RSE proposals can not be considered in isolation from the wider societal problems they are connected to, including VAWG. As outlined above, there is appetite in Northern Ireland for improved, standardised RSE that is inclusive, accessible and age-appropriate.

### **3.2 International standards**

Women's Platform 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.<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup>. 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Women's Aid Influencers and Attitudes, 2023 <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CYP-WWF-FINAL-SMALL.pdf> p.5

<sup>8</sup> [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.

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

<sup>10</sup> [Concluding Observations](#) 2019, 2013, 2008 on examinations of the UK under CEDAW

The UK has further emphasised its commitment to full sexual and reproductive rights in the Agreed Conclusions of the CSW 65 conference in 2021<sup>11</sup> and in its commitment to the UN Generation Equality Forum initiative<sup>12</sup>, 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'<sup>13</sup>.

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 Disabilities<sup>14</sup>. The statement stresses that disability rights and gender equality are two components of the same human rights 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'.

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<sup>11</sup> 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](#)',

<sup>12</sup> Generation Equality Forum blueprint for [Compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action](#)

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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)

### **3.2 Abortion**

When the abortion services consultation was released we were told no public engagement was necessary yet organised religion responses defied this and submitted responses which were then misrepresented as a majority lack of support, despite all previous evidence. We don't want this to happen for RSE.

While abortion is not listed as an area that the Inquiry wishes to focus on, the WPG take the view that this is a significant oversight, not least because the most recent changes in the law around RSE came about on foot of a legal requirement incumbent upon the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to act to ensure that education on abortion and contraception was provided. This legal obligation itself derived from a 2019 piece of legislation that enshrined CEDAW recommendations into law, a feat that came as a result of decades of lobbying and diligent work by the women's movement in Northern Ireland.

The consultation carried out by the Department of Education in 2023 was not clear on this at all, and instead framed its questions as though the objections of members of the public could overturn primary legislation. To this day in evidence sessions MLAs seem to suggest that this obligation is a matter for decision in the future. Opportunities to clarify the legal obligations have been wasted and despite this, the Inquiry has not chosen to include a call for evidence on this pivotal aspect of RSE.

We believe that this is one of the most essential elements of RSE and this is reflected in its inclusion in the CEDAW recommendations that ultimately led to the change in the law. To this end, we have chosen to include evidence on abortion regardless.

The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 introduced in March 2020 are designed to implement the recommendations contained in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW Report of the inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Report). As per the law, the Secretary of State must ensure that the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report are implemented in respect of Northern Ireland.

Section 86 states their recommendations as:

B. Sexual and reproductive health rights and services

86. The Committee recommends that the State party:

(a) Provide non-biased, scientifically sound and rights-based counselling and information on sexual and reproductive health services, including on all methods of contraception and access to abortion;

(b) Ensure accessibility and affordability of sexual and reproductive health services and products, including on safe and modern contraception, including oral and emergency, long term or permanent and adopt a protocol to facilitate access at pharmacies, clinics and hospitals;

(c) Provide women with access to high quality abortion and post-abortion care in all public health facilities, and adopt guidance on doctor-patient confidentiality in this area;

(d) 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;

(e) Intensify awareness-raising campaigns on sexual and reproductive health rights and services, including on access to modern contraception;

(f) Adopt a strategy to combat gender-based stereotypes regarding women's primary role as mothers; and

(g) Protect women from harassment by anti-abortion

Alliance for Choice, an organisation who have decades long experience in abortion rights, access and justice, are also concerned at how abortion has been centred, rather than the full scope of Relationship and Sex Education (RSE). The misleading premise from the outset is that abortion is only 'controversial' rather than the reality of it being a common and widely availed-of service in NI. The demand of the legislation that obligates this change in RSE is for factual, scientific and accurate information to be provided. Instead, the consultation from the Department of Education (DE) has set a tone of 'the implications of providing abortion information' in a way that introduces it as a stigmatised topic. As such, Alliance for Choice believe it is necessary to qualify the framing of abortion and reassert that pro-choice is the majority view in (NI), with over 72% of people believing in a woman's right to choose<sup>1516</sup>.

Awareness that certain areas of knowledge are being withheld will only lead children to the internet and social media for access to this knowledge. Allowing random strangers on Google or TikTok to be our childrens' main educators on relationships and sex, risks exposing them to misinformation, myths, and many misconceptions which will perpetuate harmful stereotypes, abuse and gendered violence..

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<sup>15</sup>[https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/millward\\_brown\\_report\\_of\\_public\\_opinion\\_research\\_oct\\_2016.pdf%3FVersionId%3DnP2thVJzOUNNwBthwikkJ\\_UM\\_PQmoAKO&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwj1l-zziNgCAxWlqVwKHRd5A4YQFnoECBkQAQ&usq=AOvVaw1nPllmXSwGQUm5j-EDWcYh](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/millward_brown_report_of_public_opinion_research_oct_2016.pdf%3FVersionId%3DnP2thVJzOUNNwBthwikkJ_UM_PQmoAKO&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwj1l-zziNgCAxWlqVwKHRd5A4YQFnoECBkQAQ&usq=AOvVaw1nPllmXSwGQUm5j-EDWcYh)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2018/Abortion/NOPRISON.html>

## *Omissions*

Another concern is what is notably absent from the consultation; we would have welcomed questions on and outlines for plans on the regular updating of materials in the RSE hub. The legislation sets out the need for comprehensive education, and there are excellent standards set out in the NIHRC report on RSE that should guide this process<sup>17</sup>. The minimum content order is a low bar, literally a minimum standard and the current curriculum contains framing, language and definitions that are not only outdated, but exclusionary. For example 'Abstinence' is not a scientific method of contraception and is largely based on a moral view rather than scientific findings. Similarly, 'marriage' is given precedence over other types of relationships by their notable absence in the curriculum.

We would urge the Department to take the view that this is an opportunity to start afresh with the curriculum. Rather than add on or embellish current minimum standards or curriculum lists and definitions, this is an opportunity to provide new ones entirely and those which embrace the plurality, diversity and reality of our society - an opportunity to be genuinely inclusive and move away from outdated and heteronormative assumptions about sex and relationships and one which adopts an intersectional approach from the very outset.

## *The protections of RSE*

The consultation overall does not frame RSE as a protective measure for young people, as it should do. The Gillen Review<sup>18</sup> makes clear the need for a reform of RSE. In 2022 the Department under the remit of the then Minister for Education, stated that the Department would lead work to review RSE provision, including the minimum content order. The opportunity to do so now presents itself and the Department should take account of the protection that RSE offers for young people.

The vast majority of children who experience sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew (NSPCC 2021)<sup>19</sup>. Children need to be able to identify grooming and abuse in order to seek safety from a trusted adult. RSE is the best way to ensure this information is provided in a safe and age appropriate pathway and as a key form of prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation of children. If we want to make sure that people who have been the victims of sexual abuse can come forward,

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/education-law/394-education-news/52554-sex-education-legal-challenge-rejected-in-high-court>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/gillen-report-recommendations.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/statistics-child-abuse/>

they need to know what the differences between healthy and dangerous relationships are and where to access the best help and support<sup>20</sup>.

#### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS.

- Resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA MUST be factual rather than only 'should be' factual, this should not be consulted on, it is a legal obligation.
- Prevention of pregnancy and abortion choices should be explicit and all statutory services should be signposted.
- Abortion does not belong in the controversial issues section but in the RSE section in order to fulfil that they should "not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception".
- Global best practice should be evidenced in all materials, from organisations such as the UN WHO guidance, CEDAW Guidance and UNCRC.
- When taught in other subjects, evidence-based RSE should not be contradicted (eg: RE)
- We are concerned that Churches are listed as stakeholders (give evidence of Institutional abuse but also because churches are not usually neutral on sex ed, LGBT, Abortion etc)

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we are very concerned that women's sector organisations were not asked to contribute evidence to this inquiry, and had to instead seek information through contacts in other sectors. As well as the inquiry's own terms of reference covering Violence Against Women & Girls, an area in which we are the recognised experts, the inquiry itself grew out of legal reform that followed the adaptation of the CEDAW recommendations on abortion; so abortion should have been included and the organisations that agitated successfully for that legal reform should have been included.

We have therefore provided the relevant evidence and would welcome the opportunity to introduce the voices of the women's sector into this inquiry.

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<sup>20</sup> [https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/RSE\\_Report\\_2022\\_0.pdf](https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/RSE_Report_2022_0.pdf)

ENDS

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