



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Consultation

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Foyle Women's
Information
Network



Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) Consultation. The Women's Regional Consortium believes that comprehensive RSE standardised across all schools is vital to aid the prevention of violence against women and girls which is so endemic in our society.

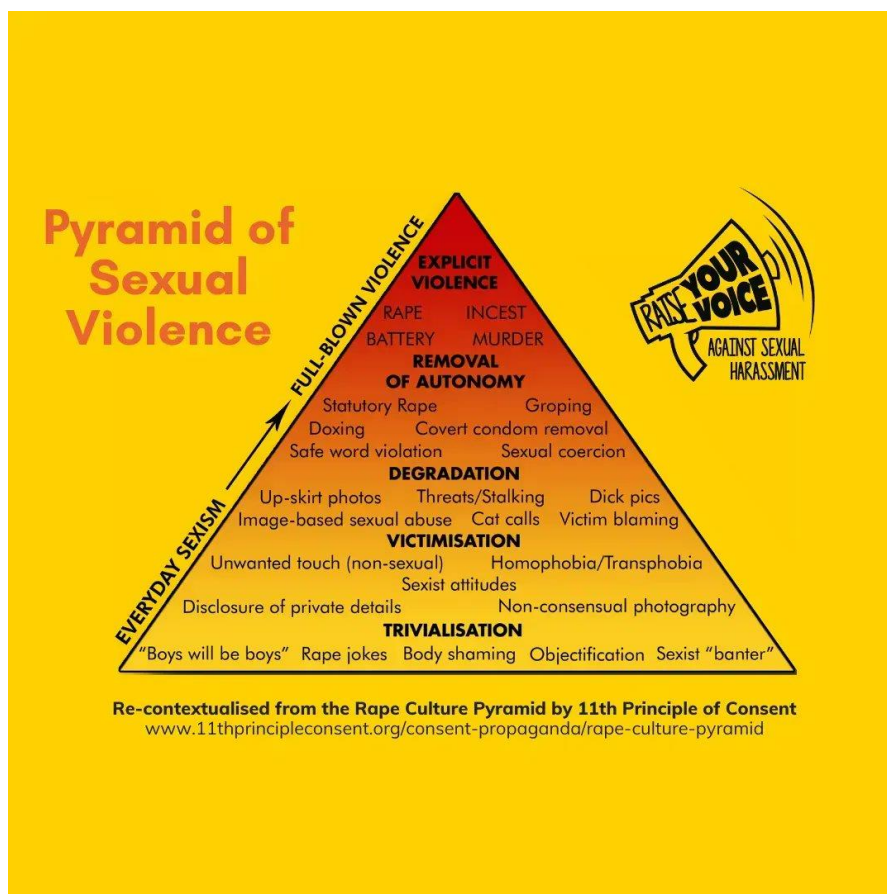
1.5 We wish to endorse the response made by the Women's Policy Group (WPG) of which the Women's Regional Consortium is a member.

2.0 General Comments

There are significant problems with Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in our society and there is an increasingly urgent need to address these problems. Rising levels of domestic abuse, femicide, sexual assault and rape have all pointed to the need for long-term cultural and societal change to effectively deal with VAWG.

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that education is key to eradicating VAWG. We believe that comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) standardised across all schools which takes into account the full range of relationships is vital to aid the prevention of violence and abuse. Young people need to be educated on what constitutes a healthy relationship and they need to be taught about consent with the aim of addressing behaviours that can lead to violence and abuse.

Womens experiences of violence and harassment exists on a continuum which includes everyday sexism and street harassment through to assault and sexual offences. These behaviours are illustrated on the 'Pyramid of Sexual Violence' (taken from Raise Your Voice project – see Section 2.3) which shows how everyday behaviours like 'banter' and sexist jokes bolster up the culture of misogyny. It shows how common attitudes and beliefs uphold and form the basis for more extreme acts of sexual violence. It is clear therefore, that action must be taken to end these misogynistic behaviours which enable and encourage sexual harassment and sexual violence. Comprehensive RSE is a key part of this process.



In the last number of years various Committees and Reviews have highlighted the importance of comprehensive RSE in schools. This includes the Expert Panel for the Gender Equality Strategy (see answer to Question 1), the Expert Panel for the Sexual Orientation Strategy, CEDAW (see Section 2.2) and the Gillen Review. The Gillen Review recognised the role of RSE in the prevention of sexual offences in its key recommendations stating the need for an extensive school education campaign.² The Review further recommended the Department for Education should “*address the need to include in the school curriculum for disabled children, children with sensory disability and those who are members of marginalised communities’ sex education designed in a culturally sensitive manner on matters such as consent, personal space, boundaries, appropriate behaviour, relationships, fears of homophobia and transphobia, gender identity and sexuality.*”³

² Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland, Sir John Gillen, April 2019, Key Recommendation 4

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/gillen-report-may-2019.pdf>

³ Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland, Sir John Gillen, April 2019, Recommendation 181

“Education is important for boys in terms of them having respect for women and girls and how they should be treated. But education is also important for girls. They need to be able to recognise when relationships are bad and abusive.”

“There needs to be education around the way women are spoken about. We had a team come into work to talk about issues around how women are spoken about, respect and the issue of pornography which is so readily available. It is so easy to get hold of on mobile phones now – that makes men think it’s OK to treat women in this way.”

“There is a lack of awareness of what a healthy sexual relationship is. A close friend of mine had to tell me that I was in a dangerous situation and I didn’t realise it. My partner would hold me by the neck when we were being intimate and I didn’t realise how dangerous this was. If they behave this way there is a greater chance of actual violence. I always thought I was quite aware of the ways of the world and modern life but I wasn’t aware of this. I had just excused it as something he liked to do.”

“There is a need for education from a very young age including young boys and pre-teens about all these issues.”

“There is a need to go into schools and for RSE to be part of the school curriculum so that it has to be done. It must be age appropriate right through school from an early age.”

“There is a need to keep repeating the right messages through school life – if it’s just once it’s not enough. This education needs to be developed every year. It should start off really young in nursery with age appropriate messages and continue throughout school life.”

“The way women are treated comes from a lack of respect – women are treated as if they are a possession. Women are seen as the ‘weaker sex’ and when a man does something to a woman he says he didn’t mean it or he’s had too much to drink. There’s always an excuse for it.”

(Quotes from Raise Your Voice Workshop Participants)

2.1 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

VAWG is a public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. It has a gendered motivation, gendered power dynamics and gendered vulnerabilities.

This violence can have hugely negative impacts for women impacting on their overall wellbeing, sense of safety and freedom and on their physical, mental and sexual health.

There is no shortage of research which highlights the prevalence of VAWG in Northern Ireland in all its forms. This research shows just how extensive this problem is and details a range of harmful behaviours likely to have long-term, negative implications for victims' health and wellbeing as well as negative implications for our local communities and society as a whole. These statistics are a clear indication of the need for education around healthy, respectful relationships.

The 'Every Voice Matters!' report⁴ found:

- 98% of women interviewed said that they had experienced at least one form of gender based violence or abuse in their lifetime;
- seven out of 10 of those surveyed had experienced some form of violence or abuse in the last 12 months;
- Half of those (50%) experienced at least one form of violence or abuse before they were 11 years old.

The 'It's just what happens' report⁵ found:

- The persistent nature of 'everyday violence' with almost all the girls and young women who participated in the research experiencing catcalling and street harassment from age 10-11 onwards;
- Girls receiving frequent unsolicited messages and sexual images from a young age. They considered this a normal part of their online life.

⁴ Every Voice Matters! Violence Against Women in Northern Ireland, September 2023
[Research Publication: Every Voice Matters! Violence Against Women in Northern Ireland | The Executive Office \(executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ 'It's just what happens' Girls' and young women's views and experiences of violence in Northern Ireland, September 2023
[IT'S JUST WHAT HAPPENS' Girls and Young Women's Views and Experiences of Violence in Northern Ireland \(executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

A study into online VAWG carried out by the Open University⁶ found significant levels of online violence experienced by women and girls across the UK. In relation to Northern Ireland the findings show that:

- 27% of women in Northern Ireland witnessed online violence.
- 14% of women in Northern Ireland who experienced online violence say this progressed to offline violence.

Growing Up Online in NI⁷ a new report by Stranmillis University College found that more girls than boys were exposed to harmful content online making it clear that more needs to be done to protect girls in particular from online risk or harm:

- girls are much more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant online, both among younger girls aged 8-13 (23% girls vs 17% boys) and older girls aged 14-18 (20% girls vs 15% boys);
- Girls aged 14-18 were 3 times more likely (5.4%) than boys (1.7%) to be asked to send nude photos/videos of themselves;
- Girls (6.9%) were more than twice as likely as boys (3%) to be sent inappropriate photos they didn't ask for, and twice as likely to see or be sent pornography (girls: 5.6% vs boys 3.0%).
- Girls were also more likely to see or be sent content promoting self-harm (girls: 3.3% vs boys 2.2%), eating disorders (girls: 4.1% vs boys 1.6%) or suicide (girls: 3.6% vs boys 3.0%).

Survey evidence produced by the Women's Policy Group in 2022⁸ into VAWG showed the following key findings:

- 91.2% of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls;
- 97.2% of women think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls;

⁶ [OU research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women and girls across the UK | The Open University](#)

⁷ [Growing Up Online in NI: new report highlights children's online activities, dangers and opportunities - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast](#)

⁸ <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

- 83% of women have been impacted by men's violence against women and girls but only 21.4% reported this to the police and 77.4% of those did not find it useful;
- 89.7% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny;
- 81.2% of women believe there is stigma surrounding issues of violence against women and girls;
- 92.3% of women think that there are barriers to reporting men's violence against women and girls;
- 95.2% of women think that reducing levels of violence against women and girls requires focusing on changing men and boys' behaviours and actions;
- 86.8% of women think that there needs to be a review of how the justice system treats victims and survivors of men's violence against women and girls;
- 82% of women first experienced men's violence before the age of 20.

2.2 International Obligations

CEDAW's General Recommendation 35⁹ on gender-based violence against women outlines how gender-based violence against women “*occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private, including in the contexts of the family, the community, public spaces, the workplace, leisure, politics, sport, health services and educational settings, and the redefinition of public and private through technology-mediated environments.*”¹⁰ The Recommendation spells out carefully the general *obligations of states parties* under CEDAW in relation to gender-based violence against women.¹¹ The overarching obligation of States parties is to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women, including gender-based violence against women.

⁹ General recommendation No.35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No.19, CEDAW/C/GC/35, July 2017
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/35&Lang=en

¹⁰ Ibid, para 20

¹¹ Ibid, para 21

In its most recent Concluding Observations for the UK Government the CEDAW Committee welcomed the adoption of measures to combat violence against women and girls in England, Wales and Scotland but were “*concerned about the lack of uniform protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence across the jurisdiction of the State party, noting with particular concern the inadequacy of laws and policies to protect women in Northern Ireland.*”¹² CEDAW recommended that the UK “*Adopt legislative and comprehensive policy measures to protect women from all forms of gender-based violence throughout the State party’s jurisdiction including Northern Ireland.*”¹³

Alongside our colleagues in Women’s Platform, the Women’s Regional Consortium urges for CEDAW to be incorporated into domestic law as recommended by several of the CEDAW Concluding Observations. Recognising CEDAW would create effective links across Departments and Strategies which can act as mechanism for creating a coherent framework for addressing violence against women and girls. As a minimum the CEDAW recommendations should inform policy and decision making to ensure the UK remains in line with international law and good practice on gender equality.

In November 2022 the UK became the 37th State to ratify the Istanbul Convention¹⁴ which aims to prevent all forms of violence against women, protect those who experience it and prosecute perpetrators. This has committed the UK Government to follow a strong set of minimum standards in combatting violence against women and girls.

Key among these are requirements to implement effective legislation to protect women and girls from violence, ensure adequate resourcing for action, and implement gender sensitive policies. The Convention also emphasises data collection as the basis of action, and stresses the role of meaningful data in prevention. It also mandates work

¹² Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Para 29 https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2f%20GBR%2fCO%2f8&Lang=en

¹³ Ibid, para 30(b)

¹⁴ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>

with men and boys to change cultures, attitudes and behaviours and provides detailed guidance on the development of judicial systems and responses.¹⁵

The Council of Europe has also recently published guidance on education for prevention under the Istanbul Convention, which emphasises gender equality and non-violent approaches and provides examples of good practice from a number of countries as well as a checklist for developing national good practice.¹⁶

2.3 Raise Your Voice

WSN is proud to be a partner in the 'Raise Your Voice' project¹⁷ alongside our colleagues in the Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) (lead partner), Reclaim the Agenda and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN). Raise Your Voice is a project to tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence across Northern Ireland. This endemic problem will be approached in a variety of ways through working directly with the community, increasing public awareness, educating organisations on best practice and lobbying for legislative advances in this area.

Raise Your Voice was funded by the Rosa Fund for Women & Girls and Time's Up UK. It was launched in August 2019 and provides workshops on sexual harassment and violence, consent, victim blaming, digital/online abuse, allyship and bystander intervention. The goal of the project is to create true cultural change in order to tackle the root causes of these behaviours and empower people to act to change this in their own lives and communities.

This project is doing vital work in local communities to raise awareness and to educate people on how to identify, challenge and prevent this type of behaviour. We believe that this type of work is essential in addressing the issues of sexual harassment and sexual violence in society.

¹⁵ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

[Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

¹⁶ Preventing Violence Against Women through Formal and Informal Education: Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention, Council of Europe, March 2022

[1680a5c70d \(coe.int\)](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.raiseyourvoice.community/>

There is a clear need for the continuation of this project given the levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence that exist in Northern Ireland. The success of this project and the interest and demand for workshops serves to highlight the need for work in this area and that there is a strong case for developing and extending this work.

We would like to see this type of community-based work developed and adequately resourced so that it can support and complement the Violence Against Women and Girls and Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategies. Any new legislation and Strategies are only as good as the knowledge, training and education around them and we believe that projects such as Raise Your Voice are crucial in helping to achieve this.

The following feedback from the evaluations of the Raise Your Voice project highlights the need that exists for this project, the value of the project in terms of personal education/knowledge, wider education and awareness raising and the real need which exists for the dissemination and mainstreaming of this information.

“I recognised some of my own actions in the past in the examples that were used, something I’m very ashamed of and made me uncomfortable. However, this is not a negative aspect of the workshop, it is vitally important that myself and men like me are able to recognise these instances and aspects of our behaviours so we can change them.”

“The trainer’s knowledge and expertise is obvious and I have been challenged by what’s been talked about. I’ll be sitting down with my son (who is 16) and watching the videos with him.”

“Educate, educate, educate! It is clear that societal norms are changing and we all need to understand what’s acceptable and what’s not. Such a workshop - short, focused, factual is a very good form of education. Thank you for running it. Perhaps it should be made mandatory in workplaces and schools.”

“Strongly recommend for youth groups, schools, colleges, councils, places of work etc. Everyone should participate in such workshops. Fantastic thanks so much!”

“This information needs to be mainstreamed. As a parent I think this type of awareness raising is vital as older attitudes are very prevalent here. I feel that girls and women cannot be left to do this work on their own. It needs to be available to everyone and on an inter-generational basis.”

“I would love to see this workshop as part of the school curriculum, it would open the topic out and plant a good seed for thought in young people’s minds.”

(Quotes from Raise Your Voice Workshop Participants)

2.4 Research on the need for RSE

A report by Belfast City Council’s Youth Forum in 2019¹⁸ found that 52% of young people believed their right to RSE education was not being met. The report also found the following:

- negative word associations dominated young people’s answers on the RSE they received in school with the four most popular words being – basic, unhelpful, useless, biased. Other frequently used negative word associations were – limited, vague, uninformative, heteronormative.
- The three most popular sources where young people learned about RSE were: 62% friends and peers, 55% social media and 54% lessons in school.
- Boys were much more likely than girls to use the internet as a source of information and for boys this was the main source of information.
- For girls, friends and peer group were the most common source of information followed by social media.
- 86% of young people felt that school was the best place to receive RSE yet only 66% of respondents had actually received RSE in school.
- 60% of young people felt that the information they received was either ‘not very useful’ or ‘not useful at all’.
- Only 10% said that they thought the information they received in RSE was ‘very useful’.
- 73% of young people said they only received RSE ‘once or twice’ or ‘rarely’.

¹⁸ [Any use? report \(belfastcity.gov.uk\)](https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/any-use-report)

- To address issues, concerns or questions young people may have that are not being met by current RSE provision, 86% felt that young people voices should be included.

Research by Relate NI¹⁹ shows the inconsistency in the quality of RSE that people in Northern Ireland have received finding that:

- Only 27% of 16-34 year olds found the RSE they received to be helpful.
- Only 8% of 16-34 year olds said that the RSE they received at school was very helpful to them in navigating and maintaining healthy relationships with a further 19% saying what they received was somewhat helpful.
- 23% of 16-34 year olds said that their experience of RSE was not very helpful to them with an additional 24% reporting they did not find it helpful at all.
- 23% of 16-34 year olds said that they did not remember receiving any RSE at all while at school.

A survey commissioned by Informing Choices NI²⁰ in 2022 found that:

- Only 17% of MLAs believed RSE in schools is satisfactory.
- 78% agreed that there should be standardised RSE curriculum used in all schools regardless of their ethos.
- 70% supported the introduction of a new Sexual Health Strategy which includes the implementation of consistent and inclusive RSE.
- 62% agreed that children and young people should be taught about different family types such as single parents, blended or same sex families as part of RSE.
- 60% agreed that information regarding the availability of contraception and access to abortion should be included within RSE in all post-primary schools.

¹⁹ [23% of 16-34 Year Olds In NI Didn't Find RSE At School Helpful \(relateni.org\)](https://relateni.org/23%-of-16-34-Year-Olds-In-NI-Didn't-Find-RSE-At-School-Helpful/)

²⁰ [MLA Survey 2022 – RSE - Informing Choices NI](#)

Research commissioned by the Department of Education²¹ with 16-21-year-old people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender on their experiences in education in Northern Ireland found the following in relation to sexual health education in post-primary schools:

- Nearly all respondents (90.4%) reported that LGB&T relationships had not been discussed as part of their sexual health education.
- Overall 38.3% of respondents said that the sexual health education delivered in their post-primary school was very unhelpful with a further 28.3% saying it was unhelpful. Just 1.7% felt that sexual health education in their school was very helpful and 7.6% said it was helpful.

²¹ [Research-report-no-62-2017 \(qub.ac.uk\)](https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-reports/research-report-no-62-2017)

Specific Questions

About you:

Please select the box that best describes you:

☒ Other

If Other, please specify:

Voluntary and Community Sector

Name: Siobhán Harding, Women's Regional Consortium

1. **The content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA** should be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion and these resources should **not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception.**

☒ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS (OPTIONAL) The space below is for you to add any additional comments should you wish to provide more detail in respect of the Statement above.

The expert panel for the Gender Equality Strategy said that RSE in schools in Northern Ireland is "*inconsistent and insufficient*".²² The expert panel called for RSE which is fit for purpose and inclusive of the experiences of all young people²³ and

²² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56378106>

²³ Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

that it should take account of the CEDAW Recommendation²⁴ to: *“take measures to introduce mandatory age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive rights in school curricula, including issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, throughout the State party.”*

We agree with the expert panel’s call and that the teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work must (not should) be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is also important that any new curriculum for RSE is fully inclusive of LGBTQI+ relationships and that it is not treated as a separate issue but integrated into all the subject areas so that LGBTQI+ experiences and lives are reflected across RSE provision.

We suggest that ‘comprehensive’ must be defined so that it is not open to narrow interpretation and that the Department should produce clear guidance around this. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission provides more detail around Defining Sexual and Reproductive Health Education in their report into Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland.²⁵

Any external organisations who provide RSE must be monitored and reviewed against the standards outlined above to ensure that they meet the requirements for the provision of RSE. Love for Life, which describes itself as a ‘Christian charity’ delivers RSE in over 75% of Post-Primary schools and over 40% of Primary Schools across Northern Ireland. Love for Life prioritises delaying sex and classifies abortion as a ‘controversial issue’.²⁶

We disagree with the wording of this question which attempts to frame this as a controversial issue. It appears that the asking of this question in this way provides

²⁴ Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, March 2019, Para 42 (c)
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

²⁵ Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform, NIHRC, June 2023
[Publication - NIHRC Report: Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform | Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](https://www.nihrc.org.uk/publications/relationships-and-sexuality-education-in-post-primary-schools-in-northern-ireland-a-compelling-case-for-reform)

²⁶ <https://www.loveforlife.org.uk/our-approach/>

an opportunity for those who oppose education on reproductive rights particularly around abortion and contraception to provide their opinions when in effect the legislation already requires this and that is not the purpose of this consultation.

We are concerned about current misinformation campaigns²⁷ which seek to undermine progress in this area and which could impact the outcome of this consultation process. These campaigns are being used to confuse the issue and try to make RSE seem dangerous and inappropriate. This resulted in the Department writing to School Principals in August 2023 to clarify issues around RSE and false information.²⁸ As suggested by the Women's Policy Group this approach should be expanded upon to prevent large numbers of children being withdrawn from a vital part of the curriculum.

2. Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of the age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.

☐ **Agree**

☒ **Neither agree nor disagree**

☐ **Disagree**

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS (OPTIONAL) The space below is for you to add any additional comments should you wish to provide more detail in respect of the Statement above.

We agree, as with any other part of the school curriculum, that parents/carers should be informed about the specific content on RSE. However, we do not think that the RSE curriculum should be treated any differently to other areas of the curriculum with a standard approach being taken across all subjects. The framing of this question is problematic in that it again attempts to frame this as a sensitive issue.

²⁷ [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) in Northern Ireland: What's happening? - FactCheckNI](#)

²⁸ [Sex education: 'False information' being spread about lessons - BBC News](#)

We would welcome further information about what is meant by the ‘specific nature and content’ of RSE referred to here and the extent to which it will be treated any differently from other subjects.

The consultation refers to The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 which provides statements of statutory minimum entitlement, which all pupils must legally receive. We believe that this is the bare minimum that should be provided and that schools should be doing much more to ensure that children and young people are equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships.

We agree with the Women’s Policy Group who advocate for the Minimum Content to be reviewed and updated as needed. It is imperative that the RSE curriculum is flexible and adaptable to change to ensure that it reflects modern life and emerging issues including harassment and abuse in an online environment. We support the Women’s Policy Group in their call for issues such as online harassment and abuse including Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) and online misogyny to be included in the Minimum Content Order.

This must also apply to training materials provided by external providers (NIHRC research showed that 94% of the schools who responded to their questionnaire used external providers to help with the delivery of RSE).²⁹ In its analysis of the materials from some providers it found that *“the materials were not in all cases considered to be comprehensive, pluralistic and objective.”* This research also found *“that limited evidence was identified of schools critically assessing external providers to assure themselves that the providers will deliver comprehensive and scientifically accurate information.”* There is a great need to continually review and update the materials used for RSE including those from external providers to ensure that RSE is comprehensive, scientifically-accurate and age-appropriate.

²⁹ Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform, NIHRC, June 2023
[Publication - NIHRC Report: Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform | Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](#)

As we have previously stated it is important that RSE is fully inclusive of LGBTQI+ relationships and that this is fully integrated into all parts of the curriculum and not treated as a separate issue to be covered and then forgotten about.

3. **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** includes at Articles 1-3 and 12 the rights of the child to **‘express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously’** and at Article 5 **‘the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child’s increasing capacity to make their own choices.’** The Department’s guidance, when developed, should consider in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations.

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☒ Disagree

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS (OPTIONAL) The space below is for you to add any additional comments should you wish to provide more detail in respect of the Statement above.

We welcome the fact that the Department are attempting to take a human rights based approach to the regulations. However, once again we believe that the framing of this question is misleading and presents RSE as harmful in some way rather than being healthy. The question also misrepresents Article 5 as the rights of children and the rights of parents/carers are not in competition with each other. Article 5 states that parent/carers have rights and responsibilities to provide guidance and direction to their child to enable them to fully enjoy their rights. They do not have the right to frustrate, withdraw or prevent their child from accessing their rights. Their role is to make sure the child’s rights are fulfilled not to frustrate these. Case law shows that the respect for parental education rights laid down in Article 5 should be focused on the wellbeing of the child, not the parents’ moral concepts (AR & LR v Switzerland).

The question makes no reference to the child's right to education (Article 28) or their rights to protection from violence (Article 19) which says that state parties are obliged to take all measures, including educational measures, to "*protect the child against all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse....., including sexual violence*".

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has upheld the child's right to education as the primary concern when balancing rights around RSE. In the case of *Konrad and Others v Germany* the ECHR found that parents may "*not refuse a child's right to education*" on the basis of their religious and philosophical convictions.³⁰

The question states that the Department's guidance, when developed, should consider in 'such instances' how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers. There is a need for clarity around this statement including which instances, how they would make this decision and by whom. If it means that parents/carers are to be prioritised then the outcome is that the child's rights are not being met and this is extremely concerning.

We are very concerned about the provision to allow parents to opt their children out of some parts of the RSE curriculum. Indeed, case law has shown no rights to an exemption. In the case of *Dojan and Others v Germany*, the ECHR upheld its decision and emphasised that sex education in schools does not violate any Convention rights if it is limited to the neutral transfer of knowledge regarding reproduction, contraception, pregnancy and childbirth, and is taught according to modern scientific and pedagogical standards aligning with the "*principles of pluralism and objectivity*." The ECHR also noted that the Convention does not guarantee any right not to be confronted with opinions even if they may be in conflict with personal convictions.

³⁰ Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform, NIHRC, June 2023
[Publication - NIHRC Report: Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform | Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](#)

More locally a Welsh Court has struck down the right to opt out. In *Isherwood and Others v The Welsh Ministers*, five parents brought a joint claim, arguing that parents had a constitutional right to excuse their children from RSE. However, the High Court dismissed the right to withdraw.

Allowing for an opt-out is based on the assumption that RSE is in some way harmful and not healthy. If providing an opt-out results in large numbers of children being excluded from the full RSE curriculum this will undermine children's rights and efforts to help prevent VAWG.

Research shows that children and young people feel that current RSE provision is not meeting their needs (see Section 2.4) leaving them vulnerable to finding out this important information from a range of other sources including the internet. This can lead to all sorts of problems including misinformation which can result in unrealistic expectations, the normalisation of abusive behaviour and increased anxieties around relationships and sexual activity. Providing comprehensive, age-appropriate and standardised RSE in all schools is about protecting children and young people by teaching them the skills they need in this modern world including how to stay safe online, how to tackle inappropriate behaviour and protecting them from sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. To be the most effective all children must get the same standard of RSE in all schools.

The need for standardised RSE has been an important consideration within the draft Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework which recognised the need for everyone in society to be equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships as outlined in Outcome 2 of the draft.³¹ Providing an opt-out would jeopardise work on Outcome 2 and the realisation of the draft vision within this Strategic Framework.

³¹ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/execoffice/evawg-strategic-framework.pdf>

4. Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme.

☐ Agree

☒ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS (OPTIONAL) The space below is for you to add any additional comments should you wish to provide more detail in respect of the Statement above.

Similar to our answer to Question 2 we agree that, as with any other part of the school curriculum, that parents/carers should have access to this information. We agree that parents should know what is coming up in terms of the RSE programme so that they are prepared and can talk to their child about it. Being open and transparent about the RSE programme also helps to prevent mis-information and ensures that schools are meeting the new standards.

However, we do not think that that RSE policy and planned RSE programme should be treated any differently to other areas of the curriculum so that a standard approach should be taken across all subjects. Once again, we suggest that treating RSE differently from other subjects reinforces this as a controversial issue and frames RSE provision as being harmful rather than healthy.