



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

**Response to: Proposal for a Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers in school**

**Issued by: Committee for Education**

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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)

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

**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 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 Committee for Education's consultation on the Right to Choose to Wear Trousers in School. We wish to endorse the response made by the Women's Policy Group of which we are a member.

## 2.0 General Comments

It is incredulous that in 2026 this consultation is needed and that girls do not have the right to wear trousers in school. Women and girls wear trousers in all sorts of settings and indeed it has been a workplace norm for many decades. Trousers are an acceptable form of dress for women and most organisations where uniforms are required have changed their dress codes accordingly. Trousers are quite often cheaper, more comfortable and more practical and there is no rational argument as to why girls should not be allowed to wear trousers at school.

For a girl to have to wear a skirt at school when she can wear trousers anywhere else sends a very particular message. She is not simply a pupil, she is a female pupil and this can affect her perceptions of her own abilities and responses to particular subject areas reinforcing gender stereotypes, for example, girls are not good at maths. Schools should be the last places where these gendered stereotypes are perpetuated. Schools should be places where girls are instilled with ambition, encouraged to realise their full potential and shatter patriarchal norms.

The ability for girls to wear trousers at school would also help girls during their period making them more comfortable at school. Menstruation Matters highlighted their disappointment that the right to wear trousers was not included in the School Uniforms Bill missing a crucial opportunity to make school uniforms more comfortable for students:

*“We’re deeply disappointed in the Education Minister’s School Uniforms Bill blocking school students’ choice to wear trousers. An amendment we called for and briefed the committee on. This simple, progressive step would have helped reduce shame and discomfort during periods, with 98% of those we polled in support. Girls are telling us what they need – so why aren’t we listening to them? This is a missed opportunity to make sure that no student’s education is limited by what they’re wearing during their period.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1286755760157410&set=pb.100064689939577.-2207520000&locale=en\\_GB](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1286755760157410&set=pb.100064689939577.-2207520000&locale=en_GB)

We believe that forcing girls to wear trousers at school is prejudicial and a form of gender discrimination. Trousers for All (a UK-wide group that campaigned to give girls the option of wearing trousers as part of their school uniform) suggests that: *“Schools forcing girls to wear skirts is equivalent to states forcing females to wear a veil and to companies forcing females to wear high heels. All of these are expressions of sexism.”*

The Equality Commission for NI states that there is no decided case law on sex discrimination arising from school uniform policies in Northern Ireland and that schools are allowed to set the rules around what pupils should wear at school. It does however suggest that: *“it is good practice for schools to review school uniform requirements regularly to ensure that they reflect current conventions on dress.”*<sup>3</sup> The Equality Commission’s website also provides an example of a challenge on this issue which resulted in the school in question changing its policy allowing girls to wear trousers:

*A pupil, Nadia Coyle, took a case against the Board of Governors of St Joseph’s Grammar School in Donaghmore. She argued that in light of what is now conventional dress for girls, it was unlawful sex discrimination to deny a girl the opportunity to wear smart trousers as an alternative to a skirt. The case was settled out of court in 2007 and the school subsequently changed its policy allowing female pupils to wear trousers.*

We highlight the recent excellent campaigning work by two school girls from Enniskillen Integrated Primary School (Rhea and Astrid) who successfully campaigned for their school to allow girls to wear trousers. They said it was *“weird and unfair”* that some schools still enforce skirts and the Women’s Regional Consortium agrees with their sentiments and pays tribute to their powerful advocacy on this subject! Rhea and Astrid contacted Dr Mairead Ryan who was involved in research to suggest that school uniform policies could be restricting young people from being active, particularly primary school-aged girls. Dr Ryan said in a letter to Enniskillen Integrated Primary School that *“Gendered uniforms can limit girls’ movement and engagement in physical activities.....*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.equalityni.org/https/www-equalityni-org/Individuals/I-have-a-problem-with-an-education-service/Sex>

*Uniform items like dresses and skirts can restrict certain movements and inhibit young girls from climbing, jumping, and participating in other forms of active play that are crucial for their development.”<sup>4</sup>*

We also refer the Committee to our response to the School Uniform Consultation in 2024<sup>5</sup> where we supported the Department for Education’s key principles on school uniforms including that they should be comfortable and that school uniform policies should be developed in partnership with pupils and their parents/carers. We made the point that schools should be legally required to comply with the Departmental Uniform Guidance. If so, we believe that girls would be allowed to wear trousers at school as for many girls trousers are more comfortable and if properly consulted the majority of female pupils would agree with this option.

We also advocated for the principle of **Flexibility** to be included within the key principles on school uniforms moving away from policies which seek to control, towards policies which are child-centred, and allow a degree of flexibility according to the circumstances. As part of this we supported a mandatory requirement for gender-neutral options for school uniforms so that pupils have the ability to choose the options that work for them and which do not reinforce harm to trans and gender non-conforming students. All students should be offered gender-neutral options for school uniform to help break down harmful gender stereotypes.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgd10plp5eo>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Womens-Regional-Consortium-Response-to-School-Uniform-Policy-Consultation.pdf>

### **3.0 Consultation Questions**

#### **1. What is your name?**

Siobhán Harding

#### **2. What is your email address?**

[policy@wsn.org.uk](mailto:policy@wsn.org.uk)

#### **3. Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?**

(Required)

Yes.

#### **4. Are you responding as:**

An organisation

#### **If you are responding on behalf of a school or organisation, what is the name of your school or organisation?**

Women's Regional Consortium

#### **5. Are You?**

Female

#### **6. Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school?**

Yes

#### **Why do you say that:**

Please see **2.0 General Comments** for why we believe that all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school.

International human rights standards underscore the principle of non-discrimination. Prohibiting girls from wearing trousers in school is a discriminatory practice that violates the principles of gender equality and the rights of women and girls. A number of international human rights standards apply in support of the right of girls to wear trousers in school including:

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).** CEDAW contains a number of articles which support the right to wear trousers in school:
  - **Article 1 Definition of Discrimination** - defines discrimination against women as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex that hinders the recognition of women's rights. This would include anything that restricts clothing choices based on gender which can be viewed as a form of gender-based discrimination.
  - **Article 2 Measures** – obligates states to eliminate discrimination and take appropriate steps to ensure equality in all areas including in education.
  - **Article 5 Stereotypes** – CEDAW calls for the modification of social and cultural patterns that perpetuate discrimination. Enforcing traditional gender norms around clothing can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.
  - **Article 10 Education** - CEDAW emphasises the need for equal access to education and the importance of removing obstacles to educational attainment for girls. Enforcing uniform policy that limits the clothing choices of girls, including prohibiting trousers, may hinder their comfort and participation in educational environments.
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).** Article 2 includes the right of children to be free from discrimination and Article 12 includes the right of children to express themselves. Restricting the ability of girls to wear trousers in school can be seen as a breach of their right to express themselves and their gender identity.
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).** Article 19 ensures the right to freedom of expression and Article 26 prohibits discrimination on various grounds including sex. The right to wear trousers in school should be protected as it can be viewed as an expression of identity.
- **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).** The ECHR is incorporated into domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998. Article 8 guarantees the right to respect for private and family life and Protocol No. 12 prohibits discrimination on any ground including sex. These rights may be violated by dress codes that enforce gender-specific clothing.

**7. To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding girls having the right to wear trousers at school:**

**It would help girls feel more physically comfortable**

Strongly agree

**It would help girls feel less exposed/ vulnerable**

Strongly agree

**It would help girls take part in more school activities**

Strongly agree

**It would make girls feel safer**

Strongly agree

**It would help girls express their individuality**

Strongly agree

**There is stigma or judgement associated with girls wearing trousers**

Strongly disagree

**It would enhance period dignity**

Strongly agree

**It would be fair**

Strongly agree

**8. In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers to school?**

No

**Why do you say that:**

On a cursory internet search on a high street retailers school uniforms the costs of generic school trousers and skirts is the same (Tesco, 2 pack black school trousers and 2-pack black pleated school skirts both cost £7 (age 6-7)).

In terms of specialist school uniform providers, it would also seem to suggest that the cost of trousers would actually be cheaper (assuming both the skirt and the trousers were

bought through a specialist shop). For example, a search on Warnocks website<sup>6</sup> shows the following (based on a selection of grammar schools in North Belfast):

- **Belfast Royal Academy** – black trousers (youth) £24.95-£29.95, navy long pleated skirt (junior school) £32.95-£35.95.
- **Dominican College Fortwilliam** (girls school) – 6<sup>th</sup> form pleated skirt £36.95-£39.95
- **St Malachy's College, Belfast** (boys school) – black trousers (mens) £30.95-£34.95 (assuming mens sizing for 6<sup>th</sup> form so it is comparable with a pupil at Dominican College at the same age)

It must be noted that for many school skirts it is impossible to buy a generic version from a high street retailer forcing families with girls to have to pay more for these items while on the other hand trousers are readily available from high street retailers to suit the vast majority of schools if not all.

### **9. Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school?**

No

### **10. Is there anything else you would like to say about the idea of a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?**

Schools should not have to be forced to provide equality for all their pupils and given that skirts are not required as part of any other uniform it is highly disappointing that this law is needed at all. While it is disappointing that a law is needed it should have happened a long time ago.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://warnocks.co.uk/grammar-and-high-schools/> (accessed 22/01/26)