

Consultation on draft Statutory Guidance on the Delivery of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) Education in Scottish Schools.

November 2023

Scottish Women's Aid (SWA) is the lead organisation in Scotland working to end domestic abuse. We are a national intermediary, and as such we act as a critical friend to Parliament and engage in research and campaigning. We are also the umbrella organisation for the 34 local Women's Aid organisations across Scotland; each organisation providing front-line, grass-roots services that deliver specialised practical and emotional support to women, children and young people who experience domestic abuse, acting in partnership with national and local stakeholders. The extensive range of services offered by members include crisis intervention, advocacy, counselling, outreach, follow-on support and temporary refuge accommodation.

This response draws on the insights from Women's Aid groups as well as a number of empirical sources that have explored the impact of gender-based violence on school aged young people.

Key points:

- A robust gendered lens must be applied to the guidance on RSHP education. The guidance must reflect the clear link between gender inequality and the pervasive nature of violence against women and girls.
- The guidance should provide more specific examples and approaches to support schools to embed whole school approaches and enable teachers to deliver confidently the RSHP education that is relevant to the current issues and experiences of young people.
- The guidance must also take a clearer children's rights approach, particularly around the right to education and balancing this carefully with parental rights to withdraw a pupil from an RSHP lesson.
- It is crucial the guidance acknowledges the distinct risks and experiences of girls and pays close attention to the importance of effectively engaging boys in RSHP education.

1. Is the draft introduction clear on the status and application of the guidance?

As the consultation document acknowledges, the RSHP guidance has not been updated since 2014. The updated guidance for schools is an important opportunity to address the changing landscape, for instance the ever-increasing use of social media, as well as address the range of behaviours associated with gender-based violence that schools are grappling with. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and feed in insights from across the Women's Aid network.

The guidance overview notes that *“The learning and understanding of healthy relationships helps to reduce domestic abuse, gender-based violence and ensures that the importance of appropriate boundaries is understood.”* We agree that education about healthy relationships provides an important starting point for young people to recognise and challenge unhealthy relationship behaviours. Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention states that formal and informal education plays an important role in primary prevention of violence against women and girls. However, the draft introduction is gender blind, failing to acknowledge that girls and boys experience relationships and family life differently and that girls are significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment, sexual violence, and domestic abuse¹. Four in five victims of domestic abuse are female with a male perpetrator².

If the guidance is to be clear about the role of RSHP education in reducing gender-based violence and domestic abuse, it must apply a more robust gendered lens. Scotland’s Equally Safe strategy³ is clear that violence against women and girls is a cause and consequence of gender inequality. We would recommend aligning the RSHP guidance more closely with the overarching principles developed within Equally Safe at schools⁴ as well as making stronger references to human rights-based approaches to education as set out in the Istanbul Convention (Article 14), the Convention on the elimination of all forms of violence against women (CEDAW; planned to be incorporated as part of Scotland’s Human Rights Bill), and the UNCRC (Article 19, Article 28).

2. How clear is the purpose of the relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education section?

Whole School Approaches

We welcome the emphasis on whole school approaches. Schools and their pupils all belong to a wider community and society, each with intersecting demographics and influences. Research⁵ highlights the importance of community role-modelling in supporting a shift in attitudes and most importantly behaviours associated with violence against women and girls. Schools are often well positioned to bring communities together and support positive conversations on issues such as gender inequality.

Whilst the guidance provides a broad emphasis on whole school approaches, more detail is needed on why these approaches matter. The guidance should be clear on the role whole school approaches can play in tackling gender-based violence, as well as illustrating the ways schools could embed this approach including their involvement with parents and key agencies such as the police and specialist third sector organisations. The importance of whole school approaches is in addressing issues that can occur in and outside of the classroom, this should

¹ <https://www.scotland.police.uk/spa-media/ofufdhff/violence-against-women-girls-strategy-v4.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/domestic-abuse-recorded-police-scotland-2021-22/pages/2/#:~:text=There%20were%20118%20incidents%20of,incident%20rates%20per%2010%2C000%20population.>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-delivery-plan-scotland-strategy-prevent-violence-against-women/>

⁴ <https://www.equallysafeatschool.org.uk/>

⁵ [ZT-What-Works-2021-Report.pdf](https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/ZT-What-Works-2021-Report.pdf) (zerotolerance.org.uk)

include schools monitoring data on incidents and experiences of gender-based violence and building effective responses.

Women's Aid workers report concerns over the support available for teachers to respond to issues associated with gender-based violence. This includes concerns that schools do not recognise patterns of coercive control in young people's relationships, concerns that schools do not know how to respond to harmful sexist language used between pupils, as well as increasing concerns on the impact of online content such as Andrew Tate and the impact this on young people's attitudes. It will be important that this guidance acknowledges the current trends of gender-based violence in schools, and maps out the available resources and routes to embedding whole school approaches and does so with a long-term focus. This should include reference to the Scottish Government's Gender Based Violence in Schools Framework⁶.

Bystander Approaches

We echo concerns raised within Zero Tolerance's response on the emphasis of bystander approaches as a preventative tool to reduce domestic abuse and gender-based violence. The draft guidance states:

"It supports learning and understanding of healthy relationships, develops personal resilience and can encourage a bystander approach, where individuals are not looked on as potential victims or perpetrators but as empowered and active bystanders with the ability to support and challenge their peers in a safe way. It can be used as a preventative tool to help reduce domestic abuse, gender-based violence, and ensures the importance of appropriate boundaries for all children and young people are understood."

Whilst such approaches may be helpful in challenging harmful behaviours as they happen, there is little research to support the notion that they could effectively *prevent* these incidents from happening in the first place. Bystander approaches should therefore be viewed alongside a wider package of preventative approaches and learning around gender inequality and gender-based violence.

3. Is the guidance sufficiently clear in relation to the rights of parents and carers and is the process for withdrawing a pupil sufficiently clear?

Whilst we recognise the importance of a parent's right to withdraw their child from a RSHP lesson, this section of the guidance overlooks a child's right to participate. The process as set out on page nine of the guidance does not contain information on what steps will be taken to ensure children's rights-based approaches underpins the decision making. As explained by UNESCO⁷ it is vital that comprehensive education on sex and relationships is centred on children's rights. The guidance must be clear on its commitment to embed a child's rights approach to RSHP education and we recommend reviewing the process to include clear steps to ensure the pupil's views have been sought.

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/groups/gender-based-violence-in-schools-working-group/>

⁷ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

4. How effective is the guidance in explaining the key issues of a whole school approach alongside a positive school ethos and culture are highlighted to teachers in delivering relationships, sexual health and parenthood education?

As stated in our response to question two we welcome the mention of whole school approaches within the draft guidance. However, more consideration should be given to how schools should embed this and why it is a helpful approach in tackling gender-based violence. It is also an omission not to frame the delivery of whole school approaches within the context of Equally Safe⁸ and wider efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls.

Insights from the Women's Aid network highlighted the importance of schools and specialist third sector organisations working alongside one another to support learning on specific issues such as domestic abuse. Many of the groups within the Women's Aid network frequently deliver sessions within schools as well as deliver specialist support services for children and young people affected by domestic abuse. The network emphasised the importance of building trust between schools and specialist services. Building relationships between schools, services and their pupils allows for safe and productive discussions on gender-based violence, as well as improved referral pathways and responses to issues identified.

The Women's Aid network shared reflections on the importance of whole school community approaches to continue the conversations after a one-off session delivered by a local agency or support service. Many of the Women's Aid groups will often be invited to deliver a lesson on domestic abuse within a school; these sessions can be effective in engaging young people in conversations about the dynamics of domestic abuse. However, the groups are clear that teachers and parents alike need to be supported to continue the learning beyond the classroom. Research⁹ demonstrates that one-off training sessions have little impact on behavioural change, and that wider cultural change is important to shift the narrative and responses to gender inequality.

Children and young people's workers in the Women's Aid network have indicated that many teachers and parents do not feel confident having conversations with young people about gender-based violence, and are increasingly concerned about the harmful language and behaviours within schools. The issues schools are grappling with often mirror wider trends in society, such as increasing concerns about image-based abuse and misogyny. Therefore, reflecting the need for both the training, as well as the tools for teachers and schools' staff at large, to also be continuous to embed in a whole school community approach.

5. Is the guidance sufficiently clear in supporting consent and healthy relationships having a greater focus in RSHP education?

A clear gendered and preventative approach to education on relationships and consent is needed within the guidance. The majority of Rise Report¹⁰ survey respondents said they did not learn about domestic abuse or healthy relationships in school. Further evidence from

⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/violence-against-women-and-girls/equally-safe-strategy/>

⁹ [ZT-What-Works-2021-Report.pdf \(zerotolerance.org.uk\)](https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/ZT-What-Works-2021-Report.pdf)

¹⁰ <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-Rise-Report-Final.pdf>

Women's Aid England¹¹ suggests that 1 in 3 girls felt that any education they did receive on relationships was 'rushed and awkward', and 1 in 4 girls felt the education they received had no understanding of how to approach pre-existing trauma.

As stated earlier in the response, Women's Aid workers have expressed concerns that schools are not always equipped to respond to reports of domestic abuse in young people's own relationships. It is imperative that teachers and young people alike are supported to recognise the signs of unhealthy relationships, including coercive control, and where young people can access support if needed.

Research¹² suggests that young people exposed to online misogyny had significantly more harmful perceptions of relationships as well as greater tolerance of harm. If consent and healthy relationships is to have a greater focus in RSHP education, the guidance must go further in addressing the broad range of influences that can normalise harassment, reinforce gender stereotypes and impact on young people's experiences of relationships.

We welcome the guidance signposting teachers to resources such as the key messages for young people on healthy relationships and consent¹³. This key message document highlights the impact of gender and power imbalances on relationships. We would recommend embedding a stronger gendered lens into this section of the draft guidance, it is vital that the prevalence and impacts of violence against women and girls is acknowledged in education on relationships and consent. Research shows that young people believe education on consent does not go far enough;

"We learned we could say no, but not what happened if they ignored that" Young person, Rise Report¹⁴ research 2022

Furthermore, Women's Aid workers and teachers have shared that it can be challenging to engage boys in discussions about healthy relationships. It is crucial that teachers are supported to engage boys in RSHP education and wider dialogue on gender inequality. The guidance should therefore seek to apply a clearer intersectional gendered lens that supports teachers to consider the risks and experiences of different pupils, including disabled people and those from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

The guidance states that:

"schools can help facilitate sensitive discussions on topics that can sometimes impact healthy relationships, such as gender-based violence, sexual harassment or LGBT relationships in the context of equality of status and rights."

We would strongly recommend reframing this to ensure it does not imply that gender-based violence and sexual harassment are elements of healthy relationships. The guidance should

¹¹ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CYP-WWF-SUMMARY-WEB-FINAL.pdf>

¹² <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CYP-WWF-SUMMARY-WEB-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2019/05/key-messages-young-people-healthy-relationships-consent-resource-professionals-working-young-people/documents/key-messages-young-people-healthy-relationships-consent/key-messages-12_young-people-healthy-relationships-consent/govscot%3Adocument/key-messages-young-people-healthy-relationships-consent.pdf

¹⁴ <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-Rise-Report-Final.pdf>

also provide more specific examples of age and stage approaches to relationship education. This should include a clear emphasis on the dynamics of domestic abuse and coercive control.

6. Is the guidance sufficiently clear in ensuring faith and belief is accurately captured in relationships, sexual health and parenthood education?

We welcome the inclusion of faith and belief in the guidance on RSHP. An intersectional approach should underpin RSHP curriculum. We echo concerns raised within Zero Tolerance's response that without clear guidance teachers and practitioners may be hesitant to approach discussions on faith or issues of gender-based violence that may be more common within some minority communities. Education is important to challenge harmful stereotypes whilst also increasing awareness of key issues such as so-called honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

It is disappointing that the guidance does not provide more specific detail on how teachers should seek to approach faith and belief within the RSHP curriculum, nor does it signpost teachers to existing resources in this area. There are significant barriers for Black and minority ethnic women accessing support, and this is exacerbated by the lack of awareness of the different issues as well as fragmented data collection¹⁵. The guidance should therefore seek to do the following;

- Firstly, enable teachers to deliver RSHP education that is inclusive of faith and belief. Whilst also covering topics such as honour based abuse and forced marriage. This should be supported by evidence-based resources.
- Support teachers and pastoral care staff to be more cognisant of the signs of gender-based violence that may affect black, minority ethnic girls, and be clear on support pathways.

7. Is the guidance sufficiently clear in ensuring gender inclusive language is used to deliver relationships, sexual health and parenthood education?

We welcome the inclusion of this section that focusses on the importance of gender in RSHP education. However, we would recommend the guidance sets out a stronger position on the role gender plays in relationships, sexual health and parenthood. The guidance must pay close attention to the way the specific topics covered within RSHP are often highly gendered, including the different experiences of parenthood, sex and relationships. Above all the connection to RSHP and the prevention of violence against women and girls must be made more clearly.

Whilst it is important to note the root cause of violence against women and girls as gender inequality. It is not enough for the guidance to simply acknowledge and encourage teachers to reflect upon gender stereotypes. RSHP guidance must make a clear, proactive commitment to increase awareness and knowledge of gender-based violence and the persistent

¹⁵ <https://womensaid.scot/honour-based-abuse-the-impacts-for-young-people-and-barriers-seeking-support/>

inequalities that create it. Reference to Scotland's Equally Safe strategy¹⁶ is important as well as the resources available to secondary schools within Equally Safe at Schools¹⁷.

Girls and women are at a greater risk of experiencing domestic abuse, sexual harassment as well as feeling unsafe or anxious in certain places and times of day¹⁸. A gender-competent curriculum should recognise the distinct needs and experiences of girls and boys. RSHP education and wider whole-school approaches can play a critical role in challenging harmful behaviour that can be otherwise be dismissed as normal. As noted above, it is critical to effectively engage boys in education on relationships, sex and parenthood. Research shows that engaging boys and men in learning about violence against women and girls can challenge ideas about masculinity and harmful language that may be celebrated within male peer groups¹⁹. Too often discussions about safety centre on the actions girls and women must take to prevent a harmful experience²⁰, rather than challenging the conditions within society and the attitudes of boys and men that create the harm.

8. Is the guidance sufficiently clear in explaining the requirement for pupils with additional support needs to have relationships, sexual health and parenthood education?

We welcome the specific focus on RSHP education being inclusive of pupils with additional support needs. Research demonstrates that disabled women are more likely to experience 'severe and frequent' gender-based violence²¹, and 16% of disabled women had experienced domestic abuse (compared to 6.8% of non-disabled women)²². There are also considerable barriers for disabled women and girls reporting and accessing support following an experience of gender-based violence²³. We echo the points noted within Zero Tolerance's response²⁴ that the guidance should be clear on the important role RSHP education can play in preventing gender-based violence against women and girls with additional support needs. We would also add that the guidance should emphasise the importance of creating clear support pathways for pupils with additional support needs who have concerns or experiences of gender-based violence, the pupil and their carers must be aware of support within the school and wider community.

Contact Details

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¹⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-delivery-plan-scotlands-strategy-prevent-violence-against-women/>

¹⁷ <https://www.equallysafeatschool.org.uk/>

¹⁸ https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/128/Girls_Speak_-_Pushed_Out_Left_Out_-_Full_Report.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sass/research/briefings/SBurrell-Engagingmenandboysinpreventingviolenceagainstwomen.pdf>

²⁰ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/649062e20978d622c4f8d3f3/1687184120539/SYWS-2016.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.sclid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Unheard-Unequal-Unjust%E2%80%933-But-not-Hidden.pdf>

²² <https://www.anncrafttrust.org/resources/disability-domestic-abuse/#:~:text=16%25%20of%20women%20with%20a,%25%20of%20non%2Ddisabled%20men.>

²³ <https://www.sclid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Unheard-Unequal-Unjust%E2%80%933-But-not-Hidden.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/policy-work/Consultation-on-draft-Statutory-Guidance-on-the-Delivery-of-Relationships-Sexual-Health-and-Parenthood-RSHP-Education-in-Scottish-Schools.pdf/>

Please note, we are happy for this response to be published in its entirety, including our details (names, organisation) and for these to be used in any sharing of the publication.