

Scottish Women's Convention
response to the Scottish
Government's consultation on:

Delivery of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) Education in Scottish Schools



November 2023

Premise

Original guidance on relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education was released in 2014, however it has been identified that this lacked proper embedding of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) inclusivity. It has also been recognised that the 2014 guidance required further rethinking to include online relationships, as well as effective education around ‘healthy relationships’. The following consultation aims to understand whether the revised guidance has fully considered these issues, and what potential gaps remain.

After the Scottish Government has received responses to this consultation, they shall consider alterations that are required and rectify their plan accordingly – incorporating suggestions made.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Introduction

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

No.

Overall, the introduction includes multiple points which contribute to clarity, and as an organisation are pleased to see the discussion surrounding improved RSHP education for the young women of Scotland. However, the omission of violence against women and girls, highlights a lack of commitment surrounding the issue. Revised RSHP education provides a good basis for reducing violence against women and girls, and directly links with Scottish Government duties to implement a rights-based approach across decision-making. This is briefly discussed in points 1.9 and 1.10, however without a specific gendered approach to rights realisation, it is unlikely to have the desired impact. We would therefore recommend comprehensive inclusion throughout the revised RSHP education plan of a commitment to eradicate violence against women and girls, alongside a gender-specific approach.

Section Two: RSHP Education

How clear is the purpose of the relationships, sexual health and parenthood education section?

Unclear.

The utilisation of a whole-school approach is welcomed, with this having a direct impact on the reduction of discrimination against women and girls. It is vital however that further clarity is provided on how this will be implemented throughout classes, with particular emphasis on commitment from schools. We would recommend including a strategy to facilitate the embedding of whole-school principles throughout Scottish education, as we hold concern around the impact of such an approach, without clear guidance.

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

Clear.

The guidance clearly lays out the process in which a parent may remove a child from RSHP education, allowing for flexibility surrounding religion and personal choice. However, there is some concern that such an approach will dampen the voices of young women, who generally hold low status across society. Young women have stated that they do not feel fully valued or listened throughout their lives, and as such it is unlikely their opinions will be fully considered by all parents. We accept that parental inclusion is vital in the proper process of education, however a safe space should be created to

enable the voices of young women to express their views, and to empower young women to be involved in decision-making which directly impacts them.

- “...you come in and you’re very eloquent and you’re competent, and you lay out your points...and because you’re a young woman, they don’t give a shit about what you’ve got to say”

Furthermore, as stated by the guidance, it is possible that LGBTQ+ children may not be ‘out’ to their loved ones for a myriad of reasons. However, as proposed in these plans, parental rights outweigh young women’s, which may be in contradiction to that young person’s wants and needs surrounding receiving LGBTQ+ inclusive education. Again, it is vital that young women are given equal parity in deciding their participation in RSHP education through a safe, confidential process.

Section Three: Embedding RSHP Education as a Whole School Approach

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?

Effective

Through a collaborative approach across educational establishments, young women are provided with increased levels of consistency, which has been remiss of sex education previously. Girls have explained varying levels of education surrounding this topic, being highly reliant on individual teachers and/or a school approach to sex education. We have heard from third sector organisations who provide education around healthy relationships that it their services are often not called for, despite being regularly available, again believing that this is highly reliant on individual school ethos.

It is key however that the ‘whole school approach’ that has been developed involves the voices of young women, placing their priorities as front and centre. Often young women are ignored and dismissed, which has significant impacts on their ability to participate in classroom activities. RSHP classes are no different, with young women often feeling embarrassed or intimidated to raise concerns or ask questions. We would therefore encourage consistent review and stakeholder feedback, carried out by pupils themselves, to understand the real working of new planning.

Is the guidance sufficiently clear in supporting consent and healthy relationships having a greater focus in relationships, sexual health and parenthood education?

No.

Firstly, we would like to highlight the phrasing in point 3.3, where the guidance states: ‘The existence of close, healthy, positive relationships in children and young people’s lives can give them a purpose and sense of belonging.’. The word choice of ‘purpose’ is questionable, particularly in relation to engrained stereotypes around women and girls, whereby they require a romantic relationship for fulfilment. Despite accepting the general point made in the guidance here around healthy relationships, that they contribute to positive outcomes, we believe that the overarching message is lessened by the inclusion of the word ‘purpose’. Therefore, we would recommend removal of this word.

Furthermore, within the ‘Consent and Healthy Relationships: Whole School Guidance’ section, it is stated that “...schools can help facilitate sensitive discussions on topics that can sometimes impact healthy relationships, such as gender-based violence, sexual harassment”. At the SWC, we do not believe that violence or harassment are elements of a healthy relationship and instead the guidance should outline this clearly through the usage of an additional bullet point. This would add clarity around what constitutes as a ‘healthy relationship’, with the provided guidance lacking clarity around this terminology.

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

No.

The usage of gender inclusivity throughout the guidance is welcomed, with the influence of stereotyping being made clear. We would however like to draw attention to the regular patterning of young women being given increased levels of responsibility in the classroom – sometimes being held responsible for their fellow classmates. Young women have highlighted that they are often used to neutralise badly behaving children, often boys, either through seating arrangements or are tasked with helping them with their work. We do believe it is positive that young women are viewed as responsible by teachers, however, this added stress can often take away from their own learning and adds to stereotypical ideas surrounding women being responsible for others. We would therefore recommend targeted measures to ensure teachers are using appropriate means to control badly behaved children, rather than adding pressure to young women’s workloads.

- “Definitely in earlier years at school when a boy was misbehaving a teacher would move them to sit next to a girl, and almost put the responsibility on the girl to look after them. That then creates an idea to boys that it’s okay to misbehave since they’ll get looked after...I definitely feel that that creates a bad environment for the girls.”
- “Throughout school I was used as a buffer between the teacher and badly behaved boys. They would tell me to help other classmates with their work when I finished mine early”

We are disappointed to note that there is no mention of misogyny within the revised guidelines, despite Scottish Government commitments to reduce misogyny through the recently proposed Misogyny Law. Misogyny has been highlighted as a key issue facing young women at school, actively contributing to reduced classroom participation from girls and increases in sexual harassment. Women in general believed that misogyny had to be incorporated into education, and that PSE classes would be the most appropriate environments in which the subject of misogyny could be discussed. They went on to state that misogyny had to be examined with boys, so that they could understand the lived impact on women, proposing that this would act as an effective preventative measure against further misogynistic behaviour. We would therefore recommend including misogyny guidance under each Key Learning Point, to underline that misogyny occurs across society, negatively impacting all citizens of Scotland.

- “...misogyny needs to be developed into the education process. And I would probably put misogyny in the same brackets as sectarianism and racism”
- “Far too long we’ve been tackling gender-based violence with reactive measures, but we need to tackle the culture that leads to prevalent misogyny...Educating the future generation on how to treat one another with respect and dignity...must go hand in hand with this type of legislative change.”

Furthermore, due to the high influence online technologies have on our society today, it would be beneficial to include a specific section on online relationships. We accept that online relationships are included throughout the guidance, however, damaging online behaviours, which encourage misogyny have been omitted. Young women are increasingly concerned about boys’ online behaviour and the consequent violence that can be associated. It has been continually suggested throughout discussions with women that an education piece would be the key preventative measure against misogyny. They have also stated that this education piece should be included in PSE and relationship-focused education, where pupils can freely discuss their views and lived experience.

- “I am constantly harassed and have even been stalked online by incels and their like. Me being a queer woman upsets them the most – they’ve sent me very detailed death threats.”
- “Incel culture is becoming more prevalent, and I believe that women/girls are at more danger now than ever”

Is the guidance sufficiently clear in ensuring relationships, sexual health and parenthood education is lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender inclusive?

No.

Through incorporation of LGBT+ inclusive education the school environment for an increased, variety of children will become more welcoming, while simultaneously providing improved levels of RSHP education. We would recommend however a further

breakdown of the figures surrounding domestic abuse, highlighting that all women experience domestic abuse at higher rates, including LGBT+ women. A gendered approach to this data is vital in emphasising the disproportionate number of women who experience violence in their lifetime, allowing for improved knowledge and may further prevention efforts.

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

It is positive that the Scottish Government hope to create a more inclusive environment for children with additional support needs in relation to RSHP education. We support the focus on a flexible approach to meet the particular needs of each child. However, due to the continued discrimination faced by young women, it is common for diagnoses of certain conditions such as autism and ADHD to go unnoticed throughout their educational journey. Though accepting of the limited remit of increasing awareness of such conditions and how they present in young women within this guidance, we believe that it would be valuable to include mention that young people who require additional support may not have an official diagnosis. This would create a guidance which adequately covers all young women.

- “My eldest daughter just left school...a late diagnosis of autism, the teachers totally missed that, and when I told them they could now see that it was relevant, which meant she was failed. There were subjects she was in that she withdrew from”
- “...we’re getting these autism and ADHD diagnoses so late in life that they’ve caused so much trauma that we’ve been masking and unknowingly dealing with all this time.”

Section Four: RSHP, Policy Guidance and Resources

Does the guidance provide sufficient resources and signposts to support teachers in delivery of relationships, sexual health and parenthood education, if not, which resources do you think are missing?

Insufficient.

The resources provided have a varied range of topics, however there are no explicit resources given which discuss domestic abuse. Despite coming up various sections, such as ‘Consent’ and ‘Child Protection’, it would be valuable to have specific resources which provide increased information on domestic and coercive abuse. We would recommend considering various third sector organisations, such as Scottish Women’s Aid, who have expert knowledge around violence against women and girls. For example, they recently completed work alongside the Young Women’s Movement, ‘The Rise Project’, which considered how young women experienced abuse in relationships.

Conclusion

Having listened to women, our three key recommendations on this topic are:

- Allow for young women’s voices to be valued throughout decisions which directly influence their education.
- Incorporate the concept of misogyny across RSHP education to prevent further misogynistic behaviours.
- Provide clear guidance for educators around dangerous online conduct, to tackle the damaging influence incel mindsets are having on young men.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government’s consultation on **Delivery of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) Education in Scottish Schools**. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women’s equality.

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