

Improve RSE in faith schools to curb forced marriage, campaigners say

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Secondary school pupils should be taught that they can choose "who to marry, when to marry and whether to marry at all", including in independent faith schools, campaigners have said.

Jewish counter-extremism group Nahamu (*logo pictured*) highlighted how a lack of relationships and sex education (RSE) contributes to forced marriage in Charedi Jewish communities in a [position paper](#) published this month.

The paper argues some Charedi arranged marriages fall within the definition of forced marriage under UK law, and calls for government action to protect young people in Charedi (ultra-Orthodox) communities.

The National Secular Society has [previously highlighted](#) the failures of many Charedi schools to deliver adequate education in RSE.

RSE in Charedi Jewish communities

The paper says the education of young people in Charedi communities can be "severely limited" because Charedi schools may redact material that is "not consistent with a specific world view".

It adds that:

- The lack of RSE in Charedi schools means engaged couples "may not be prepared for sexual relations" and are "unlikely to have any meaningful awareness of what it means to consent".
- People in Charedi communities may not "understand or recognise abusive behaviours", including sexual abuse, marital rape or domestic abuse.
- There is a "total exclusion" of any reference to LGBT+ people in "both educational and social contexts". This means LGBT+ people in Charedi communities face "additional challenges" and "very serious issues of consent" when presented with a universal expectation of early, heterosexual marriage.

The paper identifies other factors leading to forced marriage in Charedi communities, including rushed engagements with very little contact between the marrying couple; community-enforced penalties for breaking engagements; and difficulties in obtaining a divorce.

It says "improved education, particularly in schools" in Charedi communities is the best way to improve compliance with laws prohibiting forced marriage.

It recommends that the Department for Education should ensure education around forced marriage is included in mandatory RSE, including in maintained and independent Charedi schools, with support from school watchdog Ofsted.

Comment

An NSS spokesperson called the paper a "wake-up call" to the problem of forced marriage in conservative religious communities.

He said: "The paper's recommendations once again emphasise the need for all schools, including independent faith schools, to teach age-appropriate, LGBT-inclusive RSE to all pupils.

"A considerable number of state-funded and independent Jewish schools refuse to do this on religious grounds. This paper has highlighted some of the significant dangers of this.

"Children in insular religious communities are most in need of education about relationships and sex. Turning a blind eye will leave more young people at risk of forced marriage and abuse."

Jewish schools' opposition to RSE: some recent examples

- In 2020, 17 rabbis [said](#) Charedi Jewish schools would refuse to compromise with requirements to teach about the existence of same-sex couples in RSE.
- In 2019 a BBC expose revealed that two state-funded Jewish schools in north London had encouraged parents to opt children out of RSE. The NSS then revealed that the government had [dismissed concerns](#) about community pressures at one of the schools.
- In 2019 the NSS also revealed that ultra-orthodox Jewish schools were [planning to refuse to teach aspects of RSE](#) by exploiting loopholes in government regulations.

Nahamu logo [via Twitter](#).

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