

UK quizzed over collective worship law by UN

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The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has questioned laws which require collective worship in UK schools after the National Secular Society raised the issue.

The CRC [asked](#) what steps the UK is taking to repeal laws requiring daily acts of worship in schools, as part of its periodic examination of children's human rights in the UK.

The committee monitors the progress of member states' implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The CRC asked the UK to describe the measures it had taken to "repeal legal provisions for compulsory attendance at collective worship in publicly funded schools", and to ensure children can "independently exercise the right to withdraw from religious observance".

The UK is the only Western democracy to legally impose worship in publicly funded schools. Parents have a right to withdraw their children from collective worship, but children cannot withdraw themselves.

The NSS [highlighted](#) the issue of collective worship in a submission to the CRC in November.

The CRC also asked what measures the UK is taking to:

- Ensure relationships and sex education is LGBT-inclusive. The NSS's submission raised concerns about inadequate access to comprehensive RSE.
- Ensure girls' access to safe abortion services in Northern Ireland. The NSS said girls in NI are "still struggling" to access abortion services, despite the decriminalisation of abortion in 2019.
- Prevent cases of female genital mutilation and "unnecessary medical or surgical treatment of intersex children". But it did not raise the issue of [non-therapeutic circumcision](#) on boys. The NSS's submission urged the CRC to "extend its scrutiny" to this area.
- Integrate human rights education into school curricula and teacher training programmes. The NSS has [repeatedly called for](#) a stronger focus on human rights in citizenship education.

NSS comment

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "It's good to see the CRC defending children's right not to have religious rituals imposed on them, and their right to inclusive relationships and sex education.

"For too long, religious interference in education has undermined the rights to education, equality and freedom of religion or belief. The UK must take the CRC's requests seriously and urgently address these issues.

"But it's disappointing that the CRC has overlooked infant boys in its scrutiny of non-therapeutic genital cutting. All children, regardless of sex, should have equal rights to bodily autonomy and must be protected from painful, permanent and dangerous religious or cultural procedures done to them without their consent."

Testimonies in NSS submission

The NSS included testimonies from children and parents affected by the collective worship law in its submission.

One contributor, who was forced to pray in school, said: "Even at a young age I knew religion wasn't for me. That was my choice to make. It's not up to the state to force religion on anyone. Doing so is a breach of basic human rights."

Notes

- Every state that has ratified the convention is required to report to the CRC on how it is fulfilling its obligations. This allows the committee to assess what progress a state is making in implementing the convention. This reporting process happens once every five years.
- The UK's response to the CRC's list of issues is due on 15th February 2022.

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