

Beware religious impositions on women's health, says NSS

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The National Secular Society has urged the government to ensure women's health is prioritised over religious concerns in response to a consultation.

The NSS has responded to a [call for evidence from the Department of Health and Social Care](#) on a proposed strategy for women's health in England.

The society warned that women in religious communities, particularly conservative and insular communities, often face significant barriers to information and education that may be relevant to their health.

The society added that the government should seek to protect women's individual rights, and shouldn't necessarily accept that community and religious leaders speak on behalf of women within their communities on relevant issues.

Reproductive rights and violence against women

Among the points it raised, the NSS said:

- Abortion should be decriminalised and free access to abortion clinics without intimidation or harassment should be protected.
- There should be stronger action against charities which condone or promote misogyny, violence against women and girls, or FGM. Ministers should also be aware that religious 'courts' may play a part in prolonging domestic abuse.
- Pharmacies should ensure women can access the morning after pill without having to go elsewhere, amid examples of women who have been [refused service by staff citing religious concerns](#).
- The government should ban 'virginity testing'.
- LGBT+ women in religious communities in particular may be more vulnerable to mental health issues and may be targeted for 'conversion therapy'.

Religion and women's health in schools

The NSS also addressed the role of schools' approach to relationships and sexual health in part of its response, saying:

- Religious opt-outs and exceptions for relationships and sex education enable some faith schools to [teach stigmatising ideas](#) about contraception, abortion, menstruation and same-sex relationships.
- Repealing the parental right of withdrawal from RSE would enable more girls to understand these issues.

- Some state-funded faith schools have worked to [limit girls' education](#) on relevant issues.

The society also expressed concern that language in recent government [guidance on period products in schools and colleges](#) appears to suggest parents' religious concerns may take precedence over their daughters' needs and preferences.

For example, the guidance says: "Parents or carers may object to the use of some period products. You should consider the views of learners and parents or carers from all religious and cultural backgrounds when ordering products."

[You can read the NSS's submission in full.](#)

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