

NSS raises religious imposition on children's rights with UN

Posted: Wed, 30th Mar 2022

The National Secular Society has said religious threats to child rights in the UK raised by the United Nations have not been addressed.

It raised these concerns as part of the UN's universal periodic review (UPR) process, which monitors the human rights records of all UN member states.

Discrimination in faith schools

In 2020, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [urged](#) the UK to consider "strengthening policies to combat discrimination in all areas, notably in employment and education".

The NSS [said](#) discrimination is "institutionalised" throughout the UK's education system due to the prevalence of state-funded [faith schools](#). Equality law [exemptions](#) granted to faith schools allow them to [prioritise](#) children from particular religious backgrounds in admissions. They are also allowed to discriminate against teachers on the grounds of religion or belief.

It said religious segregation is "especially acute" in schools in Northern Ireland and that progress on integrated education has been "painfully and unacceptably slow". A bill placing a duty on the Department of Education to provide further support to the integrated schools sector was [passed](#) in the NI assembly earlier this month.

The NSS recommended the UK eliminate religious discrimination in schools and work towards a "fully secular public education system".

Collective worship

The UNCRC recommended the UK repeal its laws requiring [collective worship](#) in all state schools and ensure all children can withdraw themselves from collective worship.

The NSS said "little progress" had been made in this area. It highlighted how a [private member's bill](#) introduced in 2021 to replace collective worship with inclusive assemblies in non-faith schools in England was not supported by the government.

Illegal schools

The NSS said the government's plan to create a mandatory register of home educated children is "a welcome step towards ensuring the rights of children to an education". It said this would help tackle [illegal religious 'schools'](#) which refuse to register with the Department for Education so they can avoid regulations that may conflict with their religious teachings.

Relationships and sex education

The UNCRC recommended the UK ensures "meaningful sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum for all schools".

The NSS said "some progress" had been made, as relationships education was made compulsory in all primary schools and [relationships and sex education \(RSE\)](#) made compulsory in all secondary schools in 2020.

But it said this progress was undermined by government guidance allowing faith schools to teach "the distinct faith perspective on relationships" and compelling all schools to take into account "the religious background of all pupils" when planning the RSE curriculum.

The NSS said this allowed faith school to teach religiously-distorted RSE, including teaching that contraception and same-sex relationships are morally wrong. It also said the parental right to withdraw children from RSE will "leave behind" children from conservative religious backgrounds.

It recommended the UK ensures age-appropriate RSE is "impartially and comprehensively taught" in all schools and the right of withdrawal repealed.

Clerical child abuse

The UNCRC expressed concerns regarding "the low rate of prosecution of child sexual exploitation and abuse".

The NSS highlighted the prevalence of [child abuse in religious institutions](#), and said suspicions of abuse in these settings are less likely to be reported to the police and "much more likely" to be reported to the religious organisation. It said such internal reporting was "often largely ignored".

It recommended the UK introduce mandatory reporting for reasonable suspicions of child abuse.

Infant genital cutting

The UNCRC recommended the UK ensure that no one "is subjected to unnecessary medical or surgical treatment during infancy or childhood", specifically with reference to female genital mutilation (FGM) and medically unnecessary surgeries on intersex children.

The NSS said the UN should extend its scrutiny to children subjected to [non-therapeutic penile circumcision](#) for religious or cultural reasons.

NSS comment

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Religious privilege in the UK has led to a catalogue of human rights concerns, especially concerning children.

"Despite the UN repeatedly raising these issues, progress has been painfully slow. This is in part thanks to the institutional influence wielded by religious groups.

"The UK and the UN must ensure children can live and learn without harmful religious interference with their rights."

Image: [Michal Jarmoluk](#) from [Pixabay](#)

[Discuss on Facebook](#)

What the NSS stands for

The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

- [Read the Secular Charter](#)
- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)