

Religious opt-outs from RSE harming women's health, report says

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Religious exemptions from sex education at schools should be removed to protect women's health, experts have said.

The recommendation was also made by the National Secular Society in its [response](#) to a consultation on the government's strategy on women's health last year.

Last week the Department of Health and Social Care [reported](#) on the consultation responses, which also highlighted religious barriers to reproductive rights and the role of religion in violence against women and girls.

RSE "with no exemptions"

The NSS said [religious opt-outs and exceptions](#) for relationships and sex education (RSE) enable some faith schools to teach stigmatising ideas about contraception, abortion, menstruation and same-sex relationships.

The report said organisations and experts recommended that the government "review the variation" in RSE taught across all schools to ensure young people can access "unbiased and inclusive information". They said RSE should be taught to all students "with no exemptions for individuals or institutions", and include challenging "the perception that a woman's or girl's worth is connected to virginity".

Respondents said girls who attend religious schools or who are withdrawn from school do not have access to "the same level of unbiased, quality information on sexual health, contraception and abortion".

Reproductive rights

The NSS's response raised concerns that at some pharmacies staff have refused to provide women emergency contraception, [citing religious reasons](#).

The concerns were repeated in the report, which said experts and organisations recommend "better education and guidance for healthcare professionals, including pharmacists" on giving women "unbiased information on the different types of contraceptives (including emergency contraception) available".

Respondents also recommended increasing use of virtual appointments and at-home abortions. The NSS [supported](#) an amendment to the Health and Care Bill which allows early medical abortion medicine to be taken at home.

Violence against women and girls

The NSS's submission was one of 77 responses which touched on the impact of violence against women and girls on women's health. It highlighted the role of religion in 'honour' crimes, [female](#)

[genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#), and 'virginity testing' and 'repair' (hymenoplasty) procedures.

The report said organisations and experts recommended a ban on virginity testing and hymenoplasty. The NSS is supporting [measures](#) in the Health and Care Bill to outlaw both procedures.

NSS comment

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "It is encouraging that this report has acknowledged concerns raised by ourselves and others about religious threats to the health and wellbeing of women and girls.

"These findings must now be translated into policies to ensure women's health is never undermined by religious institutions. Religious exemptions to objective and inclusive RSE must be removed, access to reproductive healthcare guaranteed, and religious ideology underpinning violence against women robustly challenged."

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