

December 2022

# NWC Submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment

## Introduction

Founded in 1973, the National Women's Council (NWC) is the leading national women's membership organisation. We represent and derive our mandate from our membership, which includes over 190 groups and organisations from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations across Ireland. Our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality for women. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential and there is full equality for women.

We found the background paper and brief for the redevelopment of SPHE for senior cycle to be a well-developed and detailed document. NWC commends the NCCA for such a comprehensive brief for the redevelopment of senior cycle SPHE. In this submission, undertaken in consultation with our members, NWC will outline what must be included in the curriculum redevelopment based on the available evidence.

## Building on Junior Cycle

This will build on our previous submission on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum. In that submission<sup>1</sup>, we highlighted the need for the curriculum to be underpinned by the following aims:

- Realising gender equality
- The prevention of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse against women and girls
- Public health promotion through a whole-school approach which recognises the importance of school-based health education for not only the young people, but their families and communities
- Provision of evidence-based, inclusive and objective information
- Promoting positive sexuality and reproductive rights

In relation to positive sexuality and reproductive rights for this age group, a recent survey by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre showed that 23%<sup>2</sup> of people surveyed said they did not understand their own sexual likes and dislikes, more so for women than men. Comprehensive sexuality education is an opportunity to present sexuality in a positive manner, particularly at this crucial time when their sexuality is emerging and some young people in the class will be having sex and exploring their sexuality. It is also a vital opportunity to remind all young people that nobody should be pressured to have sex before they are ready and that there is support available if abuse or harmful sexual behaviour has occurred. This is particularly important in senior cycle, with The Irish Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Study 2018 estimating that 20% of girls aged 15-17 have had sex.<sup>3</sup>

We welcome the brief's acknowledgement that continuity and building on foundations laid previously in SPHE is vital to ensure a progression of learning. In addition to building on the foundation in junior cycle, it is essential that this learning, taking into account the goals and aims of SPHE, begins in primary school. This is recommended by the WHO and supported by students who have expressed a desire to begin learning about consent in primary school.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NWC (2022) Submission to the NCCA Consultation on the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum.

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Junior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Submission\\_2022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Junior_Cycle_SPHE_Submission_2022_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> DRCC (2021) Irish Consent Research 2021: Sexual behaviour and sexual consent – Understandings and Attitudes. [https://www.drcc.ie/assets/files/pdf/consent2021\\_presentation\\_20\\_oct\\_2021.pdf](https://www.drcc.ie/assets/files/pdf/consent2021_presentation_20_oct_2021.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Health Promotion Research Centre (2020) The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018.

<https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/2018-report---online-version-interactive---updated.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Ging, G & Castellini de Silva, R. (2022) *Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations*. <https://antibullyingcentre.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Young-Peoples-Experiences.pdf>

## The Brief for Redevelopment

We warmly welcome the inclusion of the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education in the background paper and brief. It is essential that the curriculum redevelopment draws on this guidance and the specific learning objectives outlined for 15-17 year-olds. While we appreciate the list in the brief is not exhaustive, the redevelopment must draw on all relevant recommendations for 15-17 year-olds when developing the curriculum. Relevant recommendations have been highlighted throughout this submission.

The brief provides a comprehensive overview of how the redevelopment of the curriculum will advance. In considering what the new curriculum will address, the most important point in our view is:

- *How the curriculum can respond to and support government education policy priorities and strategies, such as those aimed at promoting gender equality and addressing sexual, domestic and gender-based violence.*

It is positive to see this as a priority in the brief. However, it is essential that in communicating this to teachers it is seen as a matter of urgency and a priority with transformative potential for society at large. To be effective, all school-based stakeholders, as well as parents, guardians and carers must understand how important a curriculum rooted in gender equality is for all young people and how this will benefit them, and thus society, as they age into adulthood.

The brief addresses the separation of SPHE and RSE since the 1990s and the legacy of this. This is an important point and we completely support the integration of SPHE and RSE as an essential method of providing a holistic curriculum. The success of this will rely on the new curriculum being embedded in a whole-school approach. It is concerning to see in the document how few schools are providing the required 6 lessons of RSE per year. This level of fragmentation will be a real barrier to the delivery of a new curriculum. It is important that schools are supported to allow the time and resources necessary for RSE – at NWC we believe six mandatory lessons is too few and curriculum content and length should be expanded during this redevelopment process.

Finally, the point on *'How the curriculum can support the further development of students' social and emotional skills, health literacy skills and their skills in critical and independent thinking.'* Is crucial. Critical engagement in the course, with student participation supported by appropriately-trained teachers will be key to the success and efficacy of SPHE and RSE in senior cycle.

With these considerations in mind and having examined the evidence, NWC recommends that the curriculum redevelopment is underpinned by three core aims which should also filter through to delivery of the curriculum. These three aims are:

- advancing gender equality
- public health promotion
- prevention of violence against women and girls.

## Advancing Gender Equality

As reflected in the document, this curriculum redevelopment presents a crucial opportunity to advance gender equality. It is essential that the redevelopment process includes this as a core aim when drafting the structure and learning objectives of the curriculum and in considering the delivery of it in schools.

### Gender-proofing the curriculum at development stage

It is helpful that the brief draws on international evidence from curricula in countries around the world, namely Scotland, New Zealand and Ontario in Canada. Based on the brief, there are no explicit mentions of gender in the examples given. The international evidence used to support this aim should draw on

literature which directly supports this. UNESCO have developed a toolkit to promote gender equality in education which recommends that curriculum updates should ‘include a review or a gender audit of the formal curriculum and teaching and learning materials in use (how do they treat boys and girls), and classroom practices and learning environments (do these demonstrate any kind of gender bias). The process should be holistic and go beyond simply reviewing the curriculum documents.’<sup>5</sup>

The toolkit also recommends embedding gender-sensitivity within the learning objectives. Redevelopment must be advanced using the questions in the Toolkit set out above to ensure learning outcomes are considered in a gender-sensitive way to support the overall goal of advancing gender equality.

It sets out fundamental questions<sup>6</sup> to be asked in the review process of updating curricula:

- What objectives for promoting gender equality are set in the curriculum?
- What thematic content on gender norms, values and behaviours is explicitly included in the curriculum?
- What competences are set that are relevant to the achievement of gender equality?
- How is the learning on gender equality assessed? Are there minimum competences or benchmarks to be achieved?
- Is the gender content in the curriculum, as reflected in the resulting teaching and learning materials, applicable and likely to be effective in promoting gender equality in teaching and learning?

An overview of relationships and sexuality education across the EU has highlighted the curriculum in Austria as taking a holistic approach and supporting young people’s sexual health physically, emotionally and cognitively. It has been designed around the WHO Standards for Sexuality Education to achieve this.<sup>7</sup> In Ireland, we have examples of small programmes where curricula underpinned by gender equality and prevention of violence have been effective. The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre provides training called BodyRight<sup>8</sup> for people working with young people in schools, youth groups and colleges. It is a sexual violence prevention and education programme to support those who are educating young people about sexual violence to handle it sensitively and appropriately. It covers sexual violence awareness, consent, support, sexting and online coercion. One school who implemented the programme has spoken positively of the effects of it on the young people, particularly for student participation:

*“It was a conversation,” says Jordan. “And it was about the experience of sharing stuff. So it wasn’t just about getting the information taught.”<sup>9</sup>*

## Relevance to Senior Cycle

It is particularly important that the curriculum engages young people of this age group with issues around gender equality, sexual harassment and gender-based violence. An Irish study has shown that adolescents aged 16-17 were subjected to much higher levels of sexual harassment than teens ages 13-

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<sup>5</sup>UNESCO (2019) Mainstreaming gender equality in curricula and teaching and learning materials. [https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Education/publications/GENIA2019/19\\_Dec\\_GE\\_NIA\\_Toolkit\\_18.pdf](https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Education/publications/GENIA2019/19_Dec_GE_NIA_Toolkit_18.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2021) Sexuality education across the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5724b7d8-764f-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>8</sup> DRCC (2022) BodyRight Facilitator Training Programme. <https://www.drcc.ie/services/education-training/courses/bodyright-facilitator-training-programme/>

<sup>9</sup> Freyne, P. (2022) Teenagers talk porn: ‘Whoever’s got a smart phone watches it. It’s free. It’s everywhere’. Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/your-family/2022/11/05/teenagers-talk-pornography-whoever-got-a-smart-phone-is-going-to-watch-it-its-free-and-its-everywhere/>

15<sup>10</sup>. Online sexual harassment is a particular area of concern with 42% of the participants in that study having experienced sexual harassment online. The curriculum must account for such realities that this age group are experiencing and this must take account of online platforms and their experiences on these.

Across a myriad of research, an emerging theme is the normalisation of gender-based violence by adolescents by the time they are in senior cycle. It is of huge concern how normalised catcalling, unwanted sexual messages, inappropriate touching and harassment are given the obvious adverse impact of this on women and girls. Practical, relevant examples must be included in the curriculum in order to highlight examples of unacceptable behaviour, the impact on girls and to reinforce the inappropriate behaviour of the perpetrator rather than solely focusing on the response of the victim. Ultimately, by embedding advancing gender equality in the SPHE and RSE curricula beginning in primary school and running up to senior cycle, this has potential over time to have a considerable impact on preventing inappropriate behaviour from occurring.

**Recommendation: The redevelopment process must include a gender audit of the curriculum including applying a gender lens to specific learning objectives and ensuring it will be delivered in a way that reflects the experiences of women and girls. In addition, advancing gender equality must be embedded as a core aim.**

**Recommendation: Ensure the curriculum is engaging and relevant for students by challenging the normalisation of gender-based violence through practical examples which are inclusive of young people's experiences of online platforms.**

## Public Health Promotion

Health and education go hand-in-hand and the WHO has recognised the importance of schools for the health of not only the students, but for influencing their families and the wider community.<sup>11</sup> How this is delivered in senior cycle is as important as what's on the page. The ESRI has recommended that the senior cycle be made more engaging for every young person<sup>12</sup> and this consideration should underpin the redevelopment of the curriculum. The curriculum and associated resources and education for teachers need to consider, based on available evidence, how the curriculum can be delivered in a way which will engage students based on their needs. This will require flexibility on the part of the teachers and this will be an important consideration in initial teacher training and continuous professional development.

### Prioritising Wellbeing

The ESRI recommends that the senior cycle curriculum prioritises wellbeing, particularly due to how young women of this age tend to respond to emotional difficulties<sup>13</sup>. Senior Cycle is a stressful time for young people and preparations for the Leaving Cert can have a significant psychological impact on mental health on all students but especially for girls<sup>14</sup>. Psychological distress can present differently in girls and

<sup>10</sup> RCNI (2021) 'Storm and Stress' An Exploration of Sexual Harassment Amongst Adolescents.

<https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34644/1/RCNI-Storm-and-Stress.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> WHO (2021) Making every school a health-promoting school – Global standards and indicators. Geneva: World Health Organisation. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240025059>

<sup>12</sup> ESRI (2019) Student, Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Senior Cycle Education.

[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS94\\_1.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS94_1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> ESRI (2021) Risk and protective factors for mental health and wellbeing in childhood and adolescence.

<https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS120.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

boys and research has shown that adolescent girls are more likely to internalise their emotional difficulties, meanwhile this manifests in behavioural difficulties in boys<sup>15</sup>.

To effectively prioritise wellbeing within the curriculum, it must include learning objectives on coping strategies and options available for young people who are experiencing emotional distress. Research has shown that when girls do experience emotional difficulties, they were more likely to discuss them with parents or friends. This supports the research<sup>16</sup> which shows that girls and women show a preference for dealing with emotional or mental health difficulties through talking. It is for this reason that when discussing mental health and access to services within the curriculum, a gendered lens is taken to this to account for the different ways boys and girls internalise or externalise emotional difficulties and how they use services. Reduction of stigma around mental health and accessing mental health services is essential at this stage in a young person's life. Greater mental health literacy will also support young people with the transition post-school and ensure young people have the critical emotional regulation and health promotion skills to manage greater independence.

At this stressful time, SPHE and RSE can provide a constructive space for students to understand their emotions and feelings by increasing students' health literacy. The WHO has recommended that health literacy is included in the health curriculum to promote *health, well-being, social and emotional competence, equity and diversity as well as deep learning*<sup>17</sup>. It recommends that learning that takes place in the classroom is complemented by equitable digital learning and strategies to ensure continuity of learning when their in-person school is disrupted. This is particularly important for girls of this age group, with high prevalence of mental health difficulties in girls in senior cycle. Nearly 3 in 4 admissions to in-patient child and adolescent psychiatric units in 2021 were girls.<sup>18</sup> Girls who are absent from school and missing lessons due to health or mental health reasons should be supported where possible to continue their lessons remotely.

As cited within the NCCA consultation with students, many students want more information about self-esteem and positive body image within the curriculum. Psychiatric in-patient admissions in child and adolescents tend to "typically be female, aged 17, with a diagnosis of a depressive or eating disorder".<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is fundamental for students' health and wellbeing that the curriculum includes a learning objective on the factors which influence body image and self-esteem and the gendered differences in how this may manifest, such as eating disorders for girls.

## Reproductive Health Literacy

The brief refers to the current curriculum focusing too much on biological aspects for RSE such as contraception. NWC has called for a holistic, integrated approach to reproductive health in our report **'Every Woman: Towards Reproductive Health, Choice and Care for All'**.<sup>20</sup> This report highlights that every woman will need access to reproductive healthcare over the course of her lifespan and emphasises

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<sup>15</sup> ESRI (2021) Risk and protective factors in adolescent behaviour: The role of family, school and neighborhood characteristics in (mis) behaviour among young people.

<https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS119.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWCI\\_MentalHealth\\_Oct19\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWCI_MentalHealth_Oct19_WEB.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> WHO (2021) Making every school a health-promoting school – Global standards and indicators. Geneva: World Health Organisation. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240025059>

<sup>18</sup> Health Research Board (2022) Annual Report on the Activities of Irish Psychiatric Units and Hospitals 2021. [https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2.Plugin\\_related\\_files/Publications/2022\\_Publication\\_files/NPIRS\\_2022/NPIRS\\_Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2.Plugin_related_files/Publications/2022_Publication_files/NPIRS_2022/NPIRS_Report_2021.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Health Research Board (2022) HRB reports a continued rise in psychiatric admissions related to eating disorders among young people. <https://www.hrb.ie/news/press-releases/single-press-release/article/hrb-reports-a-continued-rise-in-psychiatric-admissions-related-to-eating-disorders-among-young-people/#:~:text=The%20latest%20figures%20from%20the,in%2Dpatient%20admissions%20in%202021.>

<sup>20</sup> NWC (2022) Every Woman: Towards Reproductive Health, Choice and Care for All. [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/15880\\_NWC\\_Every\\_Woman\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/15880_NWC_Every_Woman_Report_FINAL.pdf)

that this begins with comprehensive SPHE and RSE in schools. In relation to RSE, our recommendations in this report include:

- Comprehensive training and continuous professional development to be available to all teachers of RSE to ensure that teachers are confident delivering the curriculum and that it is embedded across all curricula and school policies as part of a whole-school approach.
- Curriculum development which is inclusive of the experiences of marginalised girls and young women and prioritises gender equality and the prevention of violence, exploitation and abuse.

While we encourage a holistic approach which includes further exploration of social, emotional and cultural issues, it is important that the curriculum comprehensively includes a learning outcome on understanding contraception and how to access it. 35% of girls aged 15-17 report having used the pill as a form of contraception<sup>21</sup> and 24% percent of 15 to 17 year-olds have had sexual intercourse<sup>22</sup>. Now that the Department of Health scheme of free contraception beginning with 17-25 year-olds has commenced, it is important that the curriculum includes details of the different forms of contraception, how to access them and what is covered by the scheme to encourage uptake. A report by the Dublin Well Woman Centre<sup>23</sup> found that myths and misinformation around contraception are a big barrier to uptake so it is important that these myths are dispelled in school. Research with a sample of young women in Ireland has indicated that when the cost barrier of contraception is removed, women would change contraception type, with many stating a preference for Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARCs) such as the coil or implant. It is important that young women are aware of the most effective forms of contraception and that those who are eligible for the scheme understand the different options available.

Additionally, it is important that the curriculum ensures that all young people understand that there are options with regard to pregnancy. The UNESCO Technical Guidance recommends a learning objective on the intersecting factors which influence if, why and when to have children, in addition to learning on unintended pregnancies, choices with regard to pregnancy and how to access support.<sup>24</sup> This includes provision of medically and legally accurate, objective information on all options, including keeping the baby, adoption, abortion and where to get further help. The Guidance also recommends a learning outcome on risk-reduction to prevent unintended pregnancies and this should link in with the learning on contraception.

Before the introduction of abortion services in Ireland after the Repeal referendum, statistics showed that in 2018, 218<sup>25</sup> Irish-resident teenagers accessed abortion services in England and Wales. Regrettably Ireland does not yet collect age-disaggregated data on abortions however based on feedback received through the Abortion Working Group convened by the National Women's Council and from START doctors, some teenagers do require access to abortion services in Ireland. It is important that the curriculum contributes to tackling misinformation around abortion and signposts girls without judgement to how to access supports in the event of an unplanned pregnancy.

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<sup>21</sup> Health Promotion Research Centre (2020) The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018

<https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/2018-report---online-version-interactive---updated.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Dublin Well Woman Centre (2020) The Contraception Conversation. Available at:

[https://wellwomancentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Dublin\\_WWC\\_CONTRACEPTIVE\\_Report\\_NOV2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://wellwomancentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Dublin_WWC_CONTRACEPTIVE_Report_NOV2020_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.

<https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> HSE (2022) Information Summary about Teenage Pregnancy in Ireland 2000 – 2020.

<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-professionals/research/research-summaries/teenage-pregnancy-information-summary-final.pdf>

Research has shown that comprehensive RSE improves media literacy which can support young people to identify websites or sources offering misleading or incorrect information.<sup>26</sup> In considering the delivery of this, giving students a safe space to explore their social media usage using creative, participatory methods can help to increase their understanding of digital consent.<sup>27</sup>

The HSE has highlighted the significant reduction in teenage pregnancy since 2000 and recommended that in order for that to continue, it is necessary to:

- *Contribute to the evidence-base to measure progress and to identify and address gaps in knowledge, support for parents and professionals, and the provision of RSE information to young people.*
- *Understand and address the relationships and sexual health education and information needs of teenagers.*<sup>28</sup>

Finally, a public health promotion approach must include holistic learning on reproductive health which takes a life course approach, including teaching on the menopause and perimenopause. Biological aspects of the programme which are included must support a better understanding of female anatomy. A UK study showed a very poor understanding of female genitalia in adulthood and highlighted the potential impact of this on health literacy and informed consent in healthcare.<sup>29</sup> Teaching about the menopause must not focus solely on physical changes experienced during the menopause, but include learning on the mental health impact of the menopause including anxiety and low mood.

**Recommendation: The curriculum must prioritise wellbeing and promote evidence-based coping strategies in a way that takes account of how girls and boys typically experience emotional difficulties. This must be relevant to young people's lives by including influential issues on young people's wellbeing such as body image concerns and the pressure of the Leaving Cert.**

**Recommendation: The curriculum is a crucial opportunity to promote reproductive health literacy and media literacy. Students should be supported to understand reproductive health from a holistic, life-course perspective. This should include learning objectives on understanding the different forms of contraception, options with regards to pregnancy including abortion, understanding female anatomy and the physical and mental health impacts of the menopause.**

**Recommendation: In promotion of public health, the curriculum must be inclusive of the experiences of marginalised girls and young women including disabled people, those from ethnic minority backgrounds including members of the Traveller community, LGBTQI+ community, and those who come from diverse families.**

<sup>26</sup> Lieberman L, Goldfarb E (2022) Sex Ed in the Post-Roe World: Implications for Public Health Education. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/10901981221125429>

<sup>27</sup> Sex Education Forum (2022) Relationships and Sex Education: The Evidence. <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20SEF%202022.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> HSE (2022) Information Summary about Teenage Pregnancy in Ireland 2000 – 2020. <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-professionals/research/research-summaries/teenage-pregnancy-information-summary-final.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> El-Hamamsy, D., Parmar, C., Shoop-Worrall, S., & Reid, F. M. (2022). Public understanding of female genital anatomy and pelvic organ prolapse (POP); a questionnaire-based pilot study. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00192-021-04727-9>

## Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls

The socio-cultural and policy context is a welcome addition in considering the curriculum redevelopment. The curriculum must be relevant to the needs of young people and be cognisant of the broader context in which learning in school takes place, thus recognising the potential it has for change. It is extremely encouraging to see this section explicitly mention the necessity for the curriculum to address *gender equality, gender identity, sexual and gender-based violence, consent, online harassment and exploitation, and the influence of pornography*. This is a necessary fulfilment under the implementation plan of the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, but it is also a moral and ethical obligation. 51% of young women who experience intimate relationship abuse experienced it before the age of 18.<sup>30</sup> The epidemic of violence against women urgently needs to be addressed and can be prevented through comprehensive RSE which is underpinned by the aim to support ending violence against women and girls. Research has shown that it is possible to prevent gender-based violence, including sexual violence, through RSE<sup>31</sup>. In addition to the strands and learning objects set out in the curriculum, the delivery of the curriculum will be critical in this regard.

### Delivery of the Curriculum

It is integral that where possible, these lessons take place in mixed-gender classrooms. This should complement an inclusive and diverse curriculum which accounts for the diverse family structures, sexual orientations and gender identities and health needs which are present in young people. Boys and girls can learn from each other's experiences, understand their point of view and develop empathy for their classmates:

*"Hearing some of the stories that the girls were telling about being catcalled and stuff," says Neil. "I'd seen catcalling happening and I didn't think it was a big deal but hearing how they felt was an eye-opener for me. I didn't understand that girls felt that uncomfortable in those scenarios... And it really opened up my mind to think about it."*<sup>32</sup>

The first large European survey to explore the relationship between pornography, sexual coercion and abuse and sexting in young people has highlighted the link between watching pornography and asking for and receiving sexual imagery from peers. This research presents evidence that 'sexting', defined in this study as "a process whereby young people produce their own pornography"<sup>33</sup>, is emerging as a method of exerting control or abuse and contribution to the perpetration of sexual coercion and sexual violence. The research also found that there was a gendered distinction to this and school-based interventions to prevent this must target boys as the main perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence. Pornography can distort understandings of what a healthy, consensual and mutually fulfilling relationship looks like with a particularly adverse impact on women. A learning objective must be included on how to identify and challenge this through the provision of accurate and inclusive education about health and sexual health for young people in this age group, linking in with learning on positive sexuality.

The DCU Anti-Bullying centre recently released a powerful report on *Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland*. This robust research with transition year students included a survey, workshops and focus groups to gather young people's

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<sup>30</sup> Women's Aid (2020) One in Five.

[https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one\\_in\\_five\\_women\\_report\\_womens\\_aid\\_2020.pdf](https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Sex Education Forum (2022) Relationships and Sex Education: The Evidence.

<https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20SEF%202022.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Freyne, P. (2022) Teenagers talk porn: 'Whoever's got a smart phone watches it. It's free. It's everywhere'. Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/your-family/2022/11/05/teenagers-talk-pornography-whoever-got-a-smart-phone-is-going-to-watch-it-its-free-and-its-everywhere/>

<sup>33</sup> Stanley et al. (2018) Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships: A European Study. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26951609/>

experiences of gender-based violence. The study showed that young girls were significantly more likely to experience:

- Cyberstalking
- Sexual shaming
- Being pressure to send sexually explicit photos
- Sexualised comments and unwanted sexual messages online

Concerningly, 28.9% of girls aged 15-17 were sent “flattering” messages by an adult stranger and this increased significantly during the pandemic. This highlights the urgent necessity to ensure all young people understand what constitutes abusive or harmful behaviour, what consent in a digital context means, and avenues for support if abuse has occurred. Recognising the harms of intimate partner violence is a recommendation of the UNESCO Guidance in addition to making students aware of the support available for victims.

A robust SPHE/RSE curriculum at senior cycle should recognise the bystander approach as an essential intervention in gender-based violence. It works by empowering both men and women and placing the responsibility for changing the environment on the whole community.<sup>34</sup> The Bystander Intervention Programme developed in UCC has been very effective in providing people with the skills and understanding to intervene in instances of violence, harassment or abuse. A modified version of the Programme has been delivered to a number of secondary schools in Cork and has received positive feedback from teachers.<sup>35</sup> The curriculum must include a learning objective on bystander interventions to encourage young people to participate in active bystander behaviours in cases of sexual violence, racism and transphobia can help to reduce harm caused by these actions.<sup>36</sup>

The study in DCU showed that girls were considerably more aware of security, privacy and reporting functions on social media platforms. The curriculum must teach all young people how to engage with these protective factors on social media. However, like with all teaching on gender-based violence, harassment and abuse, it is essential that this is designed and delivered in a way that does not put the onus on the young person to be responsible for preventing harassment and abuse from happening to them. The focus should be on encouraging respectful, consensual interactions on social media.

## The importance of prevention

Irish research has found that the pandemic had a greater impact on girls and LGBTQ+ students. Additionally, social media use rose during the pandemic.<sup>37</sup> This is an important consideration for ensuring the curriculum is relevant to students’ lives. Gender-based violence has another avenue to be filtered through, by the use of porn, unwanted messages or comments on social media and cyberstalking. A survey by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre found that a majority of adults saw a problem with consent in Ireland and pornography was identified as a contributing factor to this.<sup>38</sup> The UNESCO Guidance recommends a learning objective for this age group on the unrealistic expectations about sexual

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<sup>34</sup> Fenton, R.A., Mott, H.L. and Rumney, P.N.S. (2015) The Intervention Initiative: Theoretical Rationale. <http://www2.uwe.ac.uk/faculties/BBS/BUS/law/Law%20docs/bystander/toolkit/Theoretical-Rationale/Theoretical-rationale.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> University College Cork (2022) Bystander Intervention Outreach. <https://www.ucc.ie/en/bystander/outreach/#second-level-schools>

<sup>36</sup> Sex Education Forum (2022) Relationships and Sex Education: The Evidence. <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20SEF%202022.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Ging, G & Castellini de Silva, R. (2022) *Young People’s Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations*. <https://antibullyingcentre.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Young-Peoples-Experiences.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> DRCC (2021) Irish Consent Research 2021: Sexual behaviour and sexual consent – Understandings and Attitudes. [https://www.drcc.ie/assets/files/pdf/consent2021\\_presentation\\_20\\_oct\\_2021.pdf](https://www.drcc.ie/assets/files/pdf/consent2021_presentation_20_oct_2021.pdf)

behaviour, sexual response and body appearance and this should be included alongside the learning objectives set out in the document.

40%<sup>39</sup> of young men believe that their own enjoyment is superior to that of their partner and would continue having sex even if they suspected their partner was not enjoying it. Young people on the cusp of adulthood will experience a transition when they leave school where their perception of gender, consent and gendered power dynamics will be shaped by the influence of a myriad of factors without the safety net of class discussions in school. This can leave them open to misinformation, gender stereotypes and unclear information about how to foster emotionally healthy and responsible relationships. The senior cycle SPHE and RSE curriculum will be the final opportunity within the formal education system to provide young people with the skills to challenge unconscious biases and critically engage with consent, gender norms, gender stereotypes and the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence.

Research has shown that high levels of sexual violence are experienced by female students in higher education, with over 1,100 students<sup>40</sup> disclosing experiences of rape in a recent survey. Sexual harassment and violence on campus are widespread and regular experiences for many students and staff. While there is much good work being done to promote a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence in higher education, comprehensive RSE and SPHE in senior cycle which prepares students to live more independently when they leave school is an essential intervention to support this.

**Recommendation: The redevelopment of the curriculum and its delivery must prioritise the prevention of violence against women and girls. This must be reflective of the realities of young people's lives and learning objectives must consider how domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV) occurs in a digital context.**

**Recommendation: The curriculum must include a learning objective on recognising the harms of DSGBV and make students aware that supports are available for victims and how to access them.**

**Recommendation: The curriculum should promote the bystander approach and include learning on how to engage in bystander interventions in instances of harassment, intimidation or abuse.**

**Recommendation: Building on learning on pornography in Junior Cycle, a learning objective must be included on how to identify and challenge unrealistic expectations about sexual behaviour through the provision of accurate and inclusive education about health and sexual health, linking in with learning on positive sexuality.**

## Issues for Consideration

### The target group

The document highlights the existing inequities in provision of SPHE due to the variation in Leaving Cert, Leaving Cert Applied and Leaving Cert Vocational Programme. We agree with the suggestion in the document that a single Senior Cycle SPHE programme across LC, LCA and LCVP is necessary. A gold-standard, comprehensive curriculum committed to addressing gender equality, gender identity and gender-based violence can only be effective if delivered to every student in senior cycle, regardless of programme. UNESCO highlights the importance of remaining true to the programme to ensure the success of relationships and sexuality education. Deviations from the standard programme to adapt to

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Department of Further and Higher Education (2022) Reports on National Surveys of Student and Staff Experiences of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment in Higher Education launched by Minister Harris. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/950e4-reports-on-national-surveys-of-student-and-staff-experiences-of-sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-in-higher-education-launched-by-minister-harris/>

the LCA or LCVP can result in an asymmetry between students' learning outcomes and undermine the prevention of abuse and gender-based violence. For this reason, SPHE needs to be mandatory for all students in senior cycle.

### **Naming of this curriculum area**

In our view, a renaming of the area would not be beneficial. Resources and time would best be spent reviewing the contents of the curriculum and designing a robust programme of teacher education including updated resources and toolkits. As mentioned in the brief, this would also be important for maintaining the continuity with junior cycle. School leaders and the Boards of Management must provide leadership in promoting the value of SPHE and RSE and ensuring that it is delivered according to the curriculum.

### **Status and Time Allocation**

Timetabling of lessons in senior cycle is essential to ensure the success of SPHE and RSE. We believe a minimum of one hour teaching per week is necessary at senior cycle and RSE should be fully integrated into SPHE rather than treated as a standalone set of six sessions. The UNESCO Guidance recommends a spiral-curriculum approach which includes timetabled lessons and highlighted that programmes that offer 12 or more 50-minute sessions, and sometimes 30 or more sessions, have shown positive results. Carefully-allocated time and space need to be allocated to increase the efficacy of SPHE and RSE.<sup>41</sup>

### **Alignment with government strategies/policies and international commitments**

A notable policy development is the development of the new national policy framework for children and young people, due to be published in late 2022<sup>42</sup>. Additionally, the Department of Children, Equality, Disabilities, Integration and Youth has committed to conducting research on gender-based violence against people with disabilities<sup>43</sup>. This research may support a learning outcome on how gender-based violence is disproportionately experienced by people with disabilities.

### **Conditions needed to support effective SPHE in senior cycle**

We cannot separate the delivery of the curriculum from the conditions in which it is being delivered. Teacher training will be key to the effective delivery of the curriculum. Enabling teachers to be confident and trained in presenting all topics covered in the curriculum will require sufficient initial teacher training and ongoing professional development. This can be supported by the development of accredited SPHE/RSE qualifications.<sup>44</sup> However, this will only benefit a small number of teachers and will take a long time to see results. It is important that all teachers have skills in teaching SPHE and that adequate time is provided to support them in this. A survey of teachers by the ASTI in March 2022 has shown that heavy workload and work intensity are problems for teachers in secondary schools.<sup>45</sup> Teachers have expressed

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<sup>41</sup> UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.

<https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022) Minister O'Gorman announces consultation on next national policy framework for children & young people. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f9fff-minister-ogorman-announces-consultation-on-next-national-policy-framework-for-children-young-people/>

<sup>43</sup> Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022) Minister Rabbitte to commission research into gender-based violence against people with disabilities <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/46024-minister-rabbitte-to-commission-research-into-gender-based-violence-against-people-with-disabilities/>

<sup>44</sup> Maunsell, C. et al. (2021) TEACH-RSE Teacher Professional Development and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): Realising Optimal Sexual Health and Wellbeing Across the Lifespan. [https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/staff/2022-03/TEACH-RSE%20Research%20Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/staff/2022-03/TEACH-RSE%20Research%20Report_Final.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> ASTI (2022) ASTI Red C Survey April 2022 - Supporting Teachers, Supporting Schools. <https://www.asti.ie/document-library/asti-red-c-survey-april-2022-supporting-teachers-supporting/>

a desire for more non-contact hours which is something which would be essential for teachers to upskill and stay up-to-date on preparations for SPHE and RSE.

As part of a whole of school approach, the broader school environment will also play a critical role in the effective delivery of the curriculum. The ASTI has identified class size as being one of the biggest issues for teachers. An engaging, participatory curriculum will be difficult to deliver with large class sizes. Teachers will need time to be able to check-in with students after discussing difficult topics and it is important that trust is established between the teacher and students, which is difficult in large groups. The brief states that assessment of SPHE will be classroom-based. While assessment is crucial to the efficacy of the curriculum and has been recommended by the WHO<sup>46</sup>, it is important that teachers are supported to be flexible with development of relevant classroom-based assessment methods.

**Recommendation: SPHE should be mandatory for all students in Senior Cycle to ensure equitable delivery of learning and support the overarching goals of advancing gender equality and prevention of violence against women and girls.**

**Recommendation: A minimum of one hour a week in Senior Cycle must be allocated to SPHE. This should be supported with small class sizes to allow for increased engagement and trust-building between teachers and students.**

**Recommendation: RSE must be integrated into SPHE and supported by a whole-school approach. To facilitate this, adequate teacher training will be necessary along with more non-contact hours in school to assist with their preparations for teaching SPHE.**

## Conclusion

The provision of evidence-based, age-appropriate and comprehensive SPHE and RSE is an essential public health intervention. The curriculum redevelopment of senior cycle SPHE is an important opportunity to tie together topics on reproductive health, sexual health and wellbeing introduced incrementally since primary school. This background paper and brief shows a lot of evidence, thought and structure to support an urgently-needed modern curriculum for senior cycle students.

The curriculum must be developed with clear aims in mind, supported by the evidence. As we have set out in this paper, there is a pressing need to underpin the senior cycle SPHE curriculum with the aims to advance gender equality, promote public health and prevent violence against women and girls. It is essential that when considering the design of the curriculum itself, equal importance is given to how it will be delivered. Teachers and schools will need support to receive adequate training and have the resources available in school to allow for them to create safe, supportive and trusting spaces and put the value on SPHE and RSE that is desperately need through mandatory provision to all senior cycle students and enforcement of timetabling in all schools.

***NWC consulted our members for this submission and would like to thank the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, the Irish Second-Level Students' Union and Catherine O'Keeffe for their comments.***

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<sup>46</sup> WHO (2010) WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. [https://www.bzga-whocc.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/BZgA\\_Standards\\_English.pdf](https://www.bzga-whocc.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BZgA_Standards_English.pdf)