

# Women's Aid submission on the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE

November, 2021



Women's  Aid

## Introduction

Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974. In this time, the organisation has built up a huge body of experience and expertise on the issue, enabling us to best support women and share this knowledge with other agencies responding to women experiencing domestic violence. More information on Women's Aid is available at [womensaid.ie](http://womensaid.ie).

Women's Aid appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the NCCA on the important topic of the redevelopment of the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum. Given our remit, our focus is on the promotion of healthy relationships and the prevention of gender-based violence among young people.

## Relevant Data

Recent Women's Aid research found that one in five young women and one in eleven young men (aged 18-25) have suffered intimate relationship abuse with 51% of young women affected having experienced the abuse under the age of 18<sup>1</sup>.

International data confirms that teenage girls suffer high levels of relationship abuse:

- In the USA one in 11 female high school students report having experienced physical dating violence and one in nine report having experienced sexual dating violence in one year<sup>2</sup>.
- A UK survey of 13 to 17-year-olds found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner. Additionally, one in three girls (31%) and 16% of boys reported some form of sexual abuse within their relationships<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [One in Five young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse in Ireland](#), 2020

<sup>2</sup> [Preventing Teen Dating Violence](#), 2021

<sup>3</sup> [Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships](#), 2009

- Young people experience severe abuse. They also experience high level of abuse through the use of digital technology, in particular social media<sup>4</sup>
- Worryingly, research highlights that many young people may not understand what constitutes a healthy relationship and that sexual harassment and abuse is trivialized and normalised among teenagers<sup>5</sup> .

**Question 1: Having read the above, what stands out for you as the most important consideration in updating the junior cycle SPHE curriculum?**

Gender-based violence is rooted in gender inequality. Social norms and attitudes that are supportive of unequal gender roles and toxic masculinity underpin and reinforce gender-based violence. Women's Aid believes that schools have an essential role to play in promoting gender equality and preventing relationship violence. To successfully do so, the curriculum should address the link between unequal gender roles, harmful social norms and gender-based violence, including teenage dating violence, sexual harassment and online abuse of girls.

Therefore, the SPHE curriculum should include:

- Education on gender equality and harmful gender stereotypes
- Relationships and sex education, including consent training
- The promotion of healthy/safe relationships
- The Impact of social media, online abuse and harassment and image-based abuse
- How to identify unhealthy relationships and where to look for support

Relationship and Sex Education should emphasise in particular, the right to engage in or refuse to engage in sexual acts without coercion, fear of violence, stigmatization and discrimination and help students understand the concept of consent.

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<sup>4</sup> [Safe Young Lives](#), 2018

<sup>5</sup> [Safe Young Lives](#), 2018

The SPHE curriculum should also address the impact of pornography on children and young people. Pornography harms both girls and boys, by influencing expectations, normalising disrespectful sexual behavior and promoting a misogynistic, and often abusive and violent, models of sexual expectations.

The European Women's Lobby report *Feminist Sexuality Education*<sup>6</sup> is an excellent model of what should be included in SPHE curriculum and we strongly endorse it.

## **Question 2. Are there further suggestions or considerations that you would like the Development Group to consider when updating Junior Cycle SPHE?**

The Department of Education should have clear visibility in the forthcoming Third National Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based-violence Strategy. The work around development, delivery and evaluation of the SPHE curricula for junior and all other cycles should be included in the National Strategy with explicit clear actions, milestones, owners and budget details. Actions linked to developments and evaluation of SPHE Curriculum changes and rollouts should be included in the Strategy where appropriate to DSGBV.

Irish research on prevalence of different forms of DSGBV among young people is needed to identify prevalence and trends and ensure the curriculum is continually adapting to respond to new forms of abuse (such as intimate image abuse, cyber abuse). The Department of education should support/lead commissioning such research. This research should be included in the National Strategy.

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<sup>6</sup> [Feminist SEXuality Education](#), 2020