

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Education Secretary
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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23 July 2020

Dear Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP

Re: Vigilance over girls as they return to school and the postponing of compulsory Relationships Education/Relationships & Sex Education

We write as an organisation concerned about girls' welfare and the special role that schools have in safeguarding children from present harm and in preventing harassment and abuse in the long-term.

We are a UK wide coalition of more than 90 women's organisations and experts with extensive collective experience of supporting survivors of all forms of violence against women and girls, and working in schools to end and prevent abuse. Many of our members work with girls and young women who have experienced multiple forms of gender-based violence, and we have campaigned together for many years to improve school awareness of gender-based violence issues, and school safeguarding and abuse prevention work.

You will know that schools are an absolutely critical site for the protection of girls – they are the only place many girls may find a trusted adult to talk to (thus the importance of gender-aware safeguarding), and they simultaneously present the best opportunity for challenging attitudes which condone abuse and to transform the long-term likelihood of abuse in adult relationships, which is the aim of good quality, compulsory RE/RSE.

Detecting and responding to abuse during Covid 19 restrictions as schools return in the autumn

As schools prepare for the return of all children in September, we know that school leaders are engaged in wide-ranging planning and preparation for what will be a unique school term. We understand the need to prioritise physical safety and coronavirus protection measures, and the need for close attention to assessing where children's learning is in order that teachers can develop revised curriculum and learning plans. School leaders will be welcoming back some staff and children whom they have not seen for months, and who may have been unwell or even suffered bereavements.

We know that as part of the September return planning teachers and school workers will be reminded of their basic safeguarding obligations and their school's procedures. We write to urge the Department for Education to make a high priority of communicating to schools that the

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safeguarding responsibilities they have in September are extremely serious, and require a very high level of vigilance over children who may have been through traumatic experiences and have been unable to disclose these to any trusted adult for months. Such experiences might include being exposed to domestic abuse or other forms of VAWG including FGM, online abuse by adult strangers or by their peers, or abuse in the community by adults outside the family, both before and after social restrictions were relaxed. The vast numbers of young people with no access to youth services during the lockdown, has also led to the National Youth Agency warning of young people's susceptibility to being groomed by gangs or involved in child exploitation as lockdown is eased. Their [recent report](#) draws specific attention to the particular risks to girls and young women being recruited into gangs as they could 'fall under the radar' and move around with less visibility than young men during lockdown.

We understand that the DfE has convened a Vulnerable Children and Young People National Board during the Covid 19 crisis. This group must have considered the risks to girls' safety presented by lockdown, isolation requirements and the absence of daily school attendance, and we hope this has led to placing a high priority on listening out for signs and disclosures of abuse.

Keeping Children Safe in Education highlights the range of harms which girls and boys are at risk of, especially when they are missing from education. Although Covid-related school closures are not the same as missing from school, it might be considered that some of the risks associated with prolonged school absence are relevant as all children return to school.

The role of schools, social services and other key institutions in identifying and responding to victims of child abuse appropriately requires close attention. Recent research commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ([IICSA](#)) has found that racism can lead to failures in the response of institutions to child sexual abuse. The report said damaging stereotypes, which included the sexualisation of young Black people, or intra-familial relations in some ethnic groups, were having a negative impact because teachers and other professionals were seen to have a different idea of what is 'normal', and therefore acceptable for Black and ethnic minority children and families compared to white children and families, leading to serious failures in identifying signs of child abuse.

We hope that this learning will be taken forward by your department, and hope to see steps taken to ensure all school leaders are prioritising safeguarding and vigilance over children returning to school this coming term.

Preventing abuse in the long-term: the urgency of getting back on track with RE/RSE

There is very broad consensus among parents, teachers, young people and indeed cross-party politicians about the long-term, critical importance of RE/RSE for shaping attitudes to caring and respectful relationships, and naming and rejecting abusive behaviours before they arise. We understand the reasons for the necessary delay on compulsory status, as schools have been unable to give the dedicated time to curriculum development, training and parent consultation.

We hope you agree however, that it is of the great importance that schools are enabled to get back on track with rolling out compulsory RE/RSE and those early adopter schools are supported to continue the work already started on developing and delivering this curriculum. RE/RSE teaching can help children and young people recognise abusive behaviour and be able to talk about it, which is critical in this return to school period. It is also vital that the current inspection framework for schools is expected to monitor performance in this area. We know that policy and curriculum alone are not enough to tackle the epidemic of violence against girls, which is why we advocate an accompanying commitment to resourcing a 'Whole School Approach' which incorporates school leadership that prioritises tackling abuse; teacher training; making links with local, specialist abuse organisations; and peer working.

Being accountable for the best possible work to keep girls safe

We hope that as Education Secretary you will be able to inform Parliament in the autumn about the levels of abuse disclosure and child protection reports schools are experiencing, as well as the impact this is having. This is a critical part of improving planning around any further national and local lockdowns.

We look forward to hearing from you and are available to meet to discuss these concerns further.

Yours sincerely,



Sarah Green
Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition