

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 55th Session
26 February to 5 April 2024**

Item 3 – Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Thomas Mohan¹

We thank the Special Rapporteur for her report, especially her statement that the critical enquiry of science may be considered to clash with faith or religion.²

We are concerned about belligerent attitudes towards scientific enquiry affecting the rights of the child. In 2019, the Office for Standards in Education in England revealed that approximately 6,000 children are being taught in unregistered and unregulated illegal schools,³ many of which are places of religious instruction.⁴ Unregistered faith schools serve a variety of different religious groups, but tend to be fundamentalist, extreme, or isolationist in their outlook, providing their pupils with a narrow religious curriculum unsuitable for modern Britain. As well as evidence of severe failures in safeguarding,⁵ former pupils have told us they were not taught secular subjects like science or geography at all. Yet draft legislation to tackle illegal schools was dropped by the UK Government in 2022.⁶

We remain concerned by UNESCO's 2022 Gender Report that found an almost global picture of the gender gap in education, including in science.⁷ Further, we note that studies in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia found that some non-state faith-based schools cancel out some of the positive impact on gender equality from increased education access by reinforcing traditional narratives on gender roles in their curricula and textbooks, through gender-segregated practices and limited access to progressive role models.⁸

We ask the Special Rapporteur what additional recommendations she can make to states for the promotion and protection of the rights of children, including girls, to access and participate in science without interference from state and non-state actors.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² Human Rights Council, 'Right to participate in science (advanced edited edition)', A/HRC/55/44, 21 February 2024, para 17.

³ Humanists UK, 'New data on illegal schools reveals grave situation, says Humanists UK', 12 April 2019, <https://humanists.uk/2019/04/12/new-data-on-illegal-schools-reveals-grave-situation-says-humanists-uk/>

⁴ Ofsted, *Statistical data set: Unregistered schools management information*,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/unregistered-schools-management-information>

⁵ Ofsted, *Unregistered schools: Ofsted advice notes (2015-2016)* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unregistered-schools-ofsted-advice-note>

⁶ Humanists UK, 'Government fails most vulnerable children by dropping Schools Bill', 7 December 2022, <https://humanists.uk/2022/12/07/government-fails-most-vulnerable-children-by-dropping-schools-bill/>

⁷ UNESCO, 'Global Education Monitoring Report, Gender Report: Deepening the debate of those still left behind' 2022, <https://doi.org/10.54676/RCZB6329>.

⁸ *Ibid*, p34.