ALiGN Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

ODI Think Change

WHOSE HANDS ON OUR EDUCATION?

IDENTIFYING AND COUNTERING GENDER-RESTRICTIVE BACKLASH

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ALiGN

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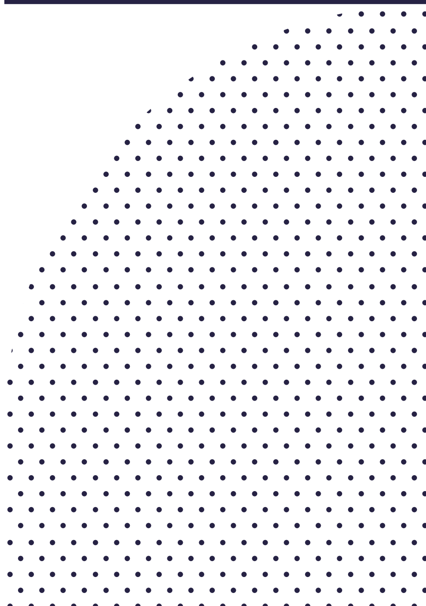

Acronyms

BBOG	Bring Back Our Girls
CSO	civil society organisation
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
EU	European Union
FWI	Family Watch International
IOF	International Organization for the Family
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (the plus sign represents people with diverse sexual and/or gender who identify using other terms)
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
PCU	Parents' Committee of Ukraine
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
US	United States

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Glossary

Anti-gender actors – A subset of gender-restrictive actors broadly motivated by defence of the 'natural family' (conceived as based on heterosexual marriage) and a social order based on patriarchal gender norms.

Disinformation – Incorrect or misleading information spread with intent to deceive.

Gender ideology – A term coined by anti-gender actors to refer to feminist and queer theories of gender as a social construct.

Gender norms – The informal 'rules' in society that define socially acceptable behaviour, roles, appearance and gender expression based on a person's (perceived) sex or gender.

Gender-restrictive actors – People and organisations that promote a narrow vision of gender relations, based on patriarchal social norms and a binary view of gender.

Misinformation – Incorrect or misleading information.

Transgender – A gender identity that differs from that assigned at birth.

1 Introduction

Organised efforts to undermine national and international laws and norms that protect and promote women's and LGBTQI+ rights are on the rise (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Khan et al., 2023). These efforts are being driven by coalitions of actors: politicians, religious bodies, civil society organisations (CSOs) and others, often with substantial international financial support (Datta, 2021; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Those organising these efforts are variously termed anti-rights actors, anti-gender actors or gender-restrictive actors, among other terms. This report, following Martínez et al. (2021) refers to them as gender-restrictive actors since they aim to promote a narrow vision of gender relations, based on patriarchal social norms and a binary view of gender (see Section 1.4).

Though the focus of these efforts varies from place to place, there are clear common threads. In particular, these actors promote a narrow, hierarchical and patriarchal vision of gender relations and sexual morality,[1] and counter what they perceive as threats to a gendered social order and national well-being arising from feminism and LGBTQI+ rights, often mis-labelled 'gender ideology'. As Martínez et al. (2021) point out, achieving the societal and legal shifts that gender-restrictive actors seek is a long-term project, involving action on several 'fronts' simultaneously, one of which is education.

Education is a powerful tool to shape students' beliefs, values and attitudes. On the one hand, education can promote human rights, equality or social justice; on the other, it can reinforce inequality and pervasive, often discriminatory, social norms (GPE, 2023). Influencing education policy and practice is therefore a strategic focus for many gender-restrictive actors, who seek to control who has access to educational institutions and what is taught. These restrictions have important implications both for students' personal development and economic and social development more broadly (Education Commission, 2016; Patrinos, 2023), and can have long-term reverberations as students carry values developed in childhood and adolescence into adult life.

Education is a powerful tool to shape students' beliefs, values and attitudes.

Understanding the influence of gender-restrictive actors in educational spaces, and ways of countering this influence, is thus essential for social justice and building more gender equal societies. This report aims to examine the impact of their efforts on formal education, based on a review of evidence from contexts outside North America and Western Europe.

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1 Some also oppose women's and children's rights within the family, and, for example, oppose laws criminalising domestic violence or corporal punishment (Fábián and Korolczuk, 2017).

It asks:

1. Who are the main actors contesting gender equality, sexual and reproductive health education, and LGBTQI+ rights in educational settings? How are they linked?
2. How have the politics and objectives of gender-restrictive actors in education varied in different parts of the world? How do these actors respond to and seek to influence societal gender norms?
3. What strategies are gender-restrictive actors using to influence different areas of education?
4. What are the key forms of resistance to gender-restrictive activity in education? How can the key stakeholders involved develop more effective strategies?

In answering these questions the report expands existing knowledge on gender-restrictive actors in four key ways:

- **It brings a focus to gender-restrictive activity in education**. This area has been relatively neglected in analysis of broader 'anti-rights' activity, with the important exception of organised mobilisation against sexuality education.
- **It identifies key areas of focus in education, distinguishing issues of access, curriculum and school practices**. It outlines the tactics and strategies used in each of these areas.
- **It integrates insights from a wider set of contexts**. In contrast to much existing research which focuses on the influence of right-wing Christian networks in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, this report also integrates insights from across Asia, North Africa, and in post-Soviet contexts. It focuses on efforts in local and national contexts to complement analyses of actions that aim to influence international policies (e.g. Ipas, 2023).
- **It explores emerging evidence on effective strategies for resisting gender-restrictive action in education**.

1.1 Methodology

The research is based on a review of grey and academic literature, conducted between August 2023 and February 2024. Literature was identified through searches using academic databases, Google and Google Scholar searches, and snowballing of sources from references and literature recommended through background expert interviews. Grey literature included reports and media sources, and selected organisational websites and social media posts identified through Google searches. The research team reviewed materials in English, French, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Ukrainian.

The report focuses on contexts outside Western Europe and North America for several reasons. The activities of gender-restrictive actors in high-income contexts such as the United States (US) and Western Europe are increasingly recognised and documented (Datta, 2018, 2021; Washington et al., 2021). This report showcases some of the impact of funding flows from well-resourced institutions with a gender-restrictive agenda in low- and middle-income contexts. Such flows are increasingly identified as a form of neocolonialism (Kojoué, 2022; Okereke, 2023), in some places interacting with and compounding laws and norms on gender and sexuality introduced by colonial powers (Martínez et al., 2021).

The research shares the limitations of desk-based reviews. In this case, and despite having a multilingual team and drawing on internet and social media-based sources as well as published reports and articles, it is likely that important examples – of both anti-rights activity related to gender in education and resistance strategies – have been missed. As the report shows, some of the more extreme efforts to restrict girls' and LGBTQI+ students' access to education has involved violent attacks on individuals or schools, and it is likely that much resistance remains undocumented in publicly available forums to protect their safety.

1.2 Scope

This report focuses on organised campaigns and political actions, and resulting policies, that seek to impose a restrictive view of gender relations based on patriarchal social norms and a binary view of gender. Thus ingrained 'everyday' gender inequalities and discriminatory practices in education systems are largely outside the scope of this report. This said, it is widely recognised that gender-restrictive discourse and campaigns help create a climate where gender inequalities are naturalised and acts of discrimination are seen as acceptable (Kojoué, 2022). The report is necessarily selective and seeks to present illustrative examples of the main areas of organised gender-restrictive activity in education. The focus on organised gender-restrictive political activity is not intended to imply that this is necessarily the only or most important barrier to gender-equitable education in a given context, but to shine a light on this specific set of challenges.[2]

1.3 Overview of the report

The report begins by defining gender-restrictive actors and discussing the key factors that have contributed to their rise (Sections 1.4 and 1.5). Chapter 2 outlines their agendas with respect to education and some of their main tactics. This is followed by reviews of empirical literature discussing gender-restrictive actors' influence on access to education (Chapter 3), school curricula (Chapter 4) and school practices (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 discusses resistance to gender-restrictive policies and practices. The report concludes by identifying key take-away points and knowledge gaps.

2 Other key barriers include household poverty, limited educational infrastructure and gender norms that limit both girls' and boys' participation in different ways in different contexts.

1.4 Definitions and key concepts

This section explains the key concepts and terminology used in this report.

Gender-restrictive actors.[3] This report draws on a definition developed by Martínez et al. (2021: 7), which describes gender-restrictive actors as:

> Organizations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to establish a gender-restrictive world order. A gender-restrictive order organises economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender normativity.

The report discusses the education-focused activities of two main groups of gender-restrictive actors:

1. self-defined anti-gender actors (who are largely active in the Americas, Europe and across Africa), and
2. conservative political parties and organisations, including some operating outside of formal politics (e.g. militant groups), who have largely not adopted this label (principally in Asia and parts of Africa).

Anti-gender actors. A subset of gender-restrictive actors, anti-gender actors represent a coalition of interests broadly motivated by defence of the 'natural family' (conceived here as based on heterosexual marriage) and a social order largely based on patriarchal gender norms. They actively oppose laws, policies and educational content – school curricula, learning materials and school practices – that they perceive as undermining these norms and values.

In particular they mobilise against 'gender ideology', a term used by gender-restrictive groups to discredit women's and LGBTQI+ rights and present them as a dangerous imposition being driven by a sexual or gender minority (Martínez et al., 2021: 16). These groups advocate for a return to patriarchal, cisgender and heteronormative societies to restore order and certainty, and a rollback of unwanted social changes that advance women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023).

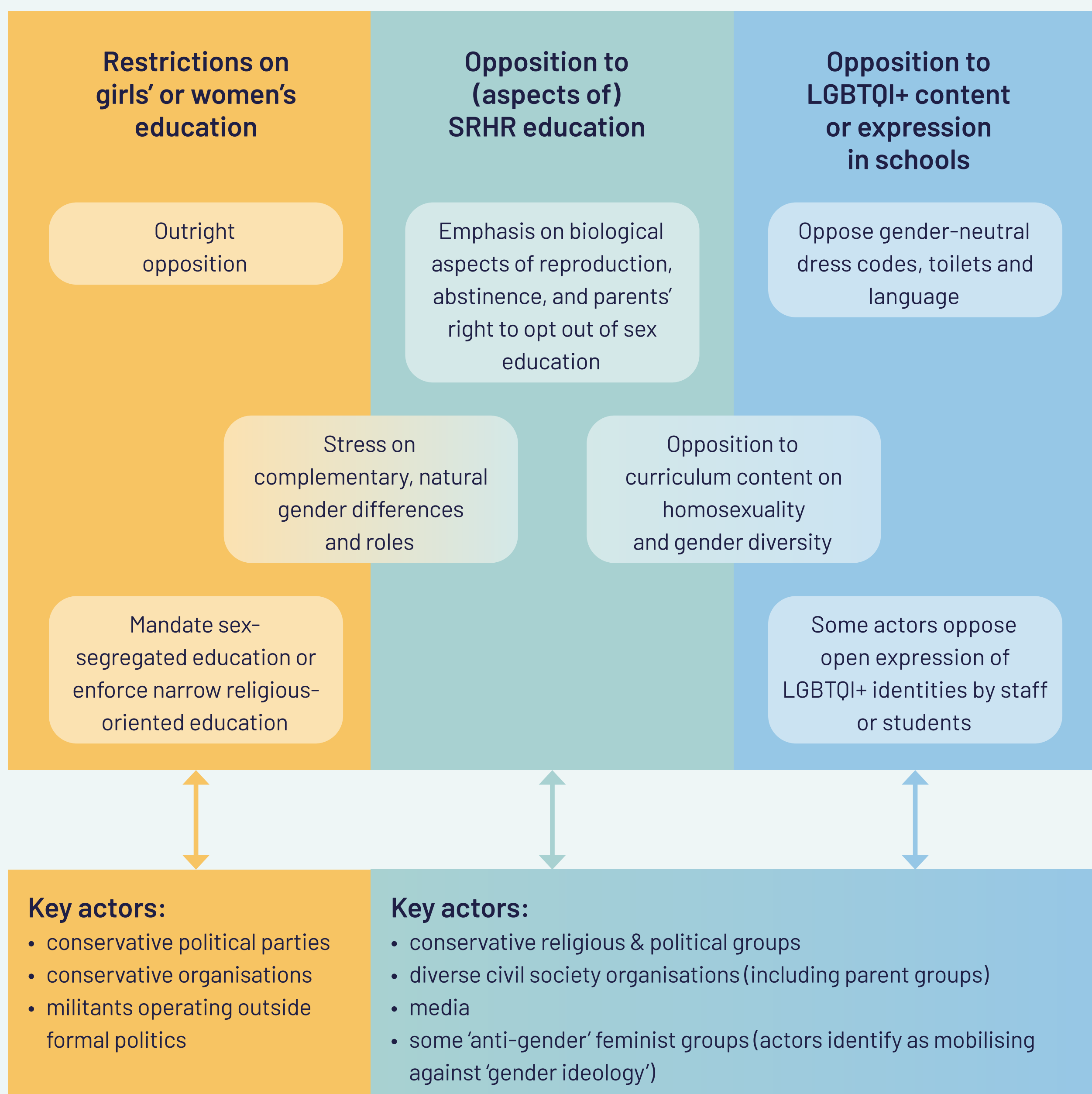
Anti-gender actors include religious bodies, associated civil society groups and politicians (mostly right-leaning). Though originating in, and often still dominated by, conservative Christian values and networks, anti-gender activists have made alliances with both representatives of other faiths and secular groups who share their perspectives, and, at times, across the left–right political spectrum (Datta, 2021; Martínez et al., 2021; Corrêa, 2022).

3 This term has been chosen in preference to anti-rights actors, as the authors agree with Sonia Corrêa (in Murray, 2022) that the latter label is misleading, as these actors seek to redefine human rights.

Conservative political parties and organisations. These groups also seek to reshape societies in line with conservative interpretations of gender relations derived from scriptures. Unlike anti-gender actors, whose focus in education is principally on school curricula and practices, this group of actors also seek to control who can access (different types) of education. They include actions to emphasise religious content in school curricula and learning materials, including the gendered religious duties of women and men. Such groups may also operate outside formal politics, such as militant groups who weaponise girls' schooling for political goals.

Clearly, this is a diverse set of actors with varied motivations and levels of activity in different contexts at different times. Figure 1 shows some of the commonalities and differences of emphasis between these groups.

Figure 1: Gender-restrictive actors: commonalities and differences



1.5 The rise of gender-restrictive actors

The dynamics that have fuelled the rise of these different groups of gender-restrictive actors differ regionally, as well as share some common elements. This section focuses on the political dynamics and funding ecosystems that have facilitated the rise of these actors.

Political dynamics fuelling gender-restrictive movements

Some scholars argue that gender-restrictive mobilisation is a reactive backlash to the gains made by gender justice movements and the global consensus around gender equality (Krizsan and Roggeband, 2018; Corredor, 2019). In this view, backlash is understood as a nostalgic restoration project and political force that responds to perceived growing threats to patriarchy and heterosexual families (Edström et al., 2023). Some countries with strong anti-gender groups have experienced economic decline, which has hindered the ability of significant portions of society to adhere to idealised or traditional gender roles (Yusupova, 2014). In such contexts, mobilisation around the threat of 'gender ideology' and 'the LGBT agenda' serves as a distraction from widespread economic insecurity and precarity, which is often accompanied by democratic backsliding (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kojoué, 2022). In other words, the mobilisation around traditional, heteronormative family forms and gender roles serves as a 'symbolic glue' for communities experiencing socioeconomic insecurity (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018: 165).

In such contexts, populist politicians thrive on and magnify rhetoric centred around challenging the wealthy elite that supposedly imposes its 'liberal' family values without the consent of ordinary people (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020; Ziemer and Roberts, 2023). Conservative nationalists often emphasise threats to the nation, both real and imagined; these may be geopolitical, but also include the threat of moral decay posed by certain groups and sets of perspectives. They identify these threats as arising from communism, religious difference, neocolonialism and Westernisation, or from other forces that resonate in their contexts (Lazarus, 2019; McEwen, 2020; Venegas, 2022). There is often an opportunistic synergy between conservative religious forces and more secular right-wing populist groups (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). Some of the most commonly mentioned threats include feminism, liberal social and sexual values (e.g. acceptance of sex outside marriage or abortion), and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity (Martínez et al., 2021).

Authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning politicians often amplify perceptions of threats and present themselves as 'strongmen' or 'saviours' who are brave enough to take action to counter these forces. For example, Russia's President Vladimir Putin has long presented himself as a strongman who will re-establish traditional family values, economic prosperity and Russia's position as the leading power on the world stage. His male saviour narrative links feminism with gay marriage and the international adoption of babies by Western gay couples from Russian families struggling to make ends meet (Holmgren, 2013). In 2024, President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, best known for his crackdown on gangs (Manetto, 2023), ordered the removal of 'all traces of gender ideology' from public education (Maldonado, 2024). In much of the Global South, anti-gender discourse is strategically intertwined with anti-colonial rhetoric, with claims that sexuality education, LGBTQI+ rights and reproductive rights are contemporary forms of Western neocolonialism (Lazarus, 2019; McEwen, 2021). Such claims ignore the scale of funding from socially conservative, largely US and European organisations and the influence they have on gender-restrictive politics in the Global South, which itself can be seen as a form of neocolonialism (Martínez et al., 2021).

The rise of Christian gender-restrictive actors since the mid-1990s, and their efforts to influence international policies and agreements, has been traced by Martínez et al. (2021) and McEwen and Narayaswamy (2023), among others. These accounts highlight the distinct roles of the Vatican and conservative Catholic organisations, the US Evangelical Right and the Russian Orthodox Church as funders, lobbyists and campaigners. They draw attention to the globalisation of the US' 'culture wars',[4] and the inspiration that the example of the US religious right provides. However, while those in power implementing these agendas are principally right-wing, the focus on 'morality' means that occasionally they are adopted by left-wing politicians, as in Ecuador during Rafael Correa's presidency (Corrêa, in Murray, 2022).

Education in many Muslim-majority contexts is impacted by funding from political organisations and governments that support non-secular education, in both the formal and informal sectors, which brings with it a gender-restrictive agenda. Saudi-funded schools, universities and religious institutions exist across Muslim-majority contexts, from the Sahel to Indonesia, and promote faith-based Islamic moral education (Prokop, 2003). Such funding has been linked to greater political alignment with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, growing public religiosity through the growth of religious seminaries, and increased sectarianism in the country (Afzal, 2019). The Taliban (from the Arabic *talib*, or student) movement originated from *madrassas*, or seminaries, in Pakistan and spread to Afghanistan (Behuria, 2007).

Scholars argue that the entry points for Islamist political influence emerged from the failures of public sector secular education in Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey and other countries. For example, this facilitated the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood, and its political party affiliates, to exert a powerful role in the spread of religious education in both formal and informal education, and on governmental education policy. This influence brings with it an emphasis on teaching traditional moral values, traditional gender roles and preference for gender-segregated educational institutions (Fandy, 2007; Riaz, 2010; Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017).

Funding

The scale of funding dedicated to promoting gender-restrictive agendas has helped spur growth and finance their campaigns and networks (Moss, 2017; Bluhm and Varga, 2020; Suchanow, 2020). Most analysis has focused on the funding ecosystem supported by Christian and right-wing sources: churches, foundations and individual philanthropists. While many civil society gender-restrictive actors pride themselves on being grassroots and home-grown, representing the authentic voices of ordinary people, most receive strategic and financial support from transnational organisations (Murray, 2022). For example:

- At least $3.7 billion was channelled to anti-gender organisations globally between 2013 and 2017 alone for work across various sectors (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020).
- Between 2007 and 2020, over $54 million was spent on the African continent by US-based Christian groups, who are known for campaigning against LGBTQI+ rights and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) (Namubiru and Wepukhulu, 2020).
- The US-based religious group Fellowship Foundation spent over $20 million in Uganda alone, contributing to the passing of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Law (ibid., 2020).

4 In the US, 'culture wars' refer to debates or conflict between people with conservative and liberal/ progressive values (e.g., Alfonseca, 2023).

The World Congress of Families, which was renamed in 2016 as the International Organization for the Family (IOF), is one of the most influential funders (see Box 1). Family Watch International (FWI), an ultra-right US-based Mormon organisation, has provided both funding and training for political leaders and youth activists across several African countries, including Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda (Cullinan et al., 2020; Byaruhanga, 2023; Kimeu, 2023). Parliamentarians in Uganda and other countries often have ties to US-based conservative groups such as FWI or the Political Network for Values (Ipas, 2023).

Box 1: Russian oligarchs, international anti-rights organisations and think tanks

With around 40 official partner organisations, including in Russia, the IOF is one of the most influential supra-national organisations in the world. The group has been effective at aligning the US Christian Right, European nationalists and the Russian Orthodox Church (Suchanow, 2020). Ultra-Orthodox billionaire Konstantin Malofeev is believed to sponsor the activities and meetings of the network, in an effort to advance Russian political interests in Europe (Barthélemy, 2018; Rivera, 2019). Other Russian oligarchs who stand out for their role in in anti-gender movements include Vladimir Yakunin and Alexey Komov. Alexey Komov, an IOF board member and its representative in Russia, allegedly worked for Malofeev.

Komov is also a board member of CitizenGO, an ultra-conservative advocacy NGO founded in Spain that promotes traditional family values and opposes 'gender ideology' (Moss, 2017). It is an online multi-language platform, which mobilises people to sign petitions and engage in letter-writing campaigns to influence policy both at national and global levels. It has mobilised Kenyans to oppose the depenalisation of homosexuality and communities in Ireland to keep abortions illegal.

Russian oligarchs fund right-wing think tanks, including the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, the Istoki Endowment Fund, Katehon and Tsargrad, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, and the International Agency for Sovereign Development, to name a few. Malofeev also led Russia's African outreach efforts following the 2019 Russia–Africa summit, which brought together key players from Russia and over 40 African countries using the premise of 'traditional values' as fertile ground for partnership (Stronski, 2019).

The levels of funding have both contributed to the creation of new organisations with a gender-restrictive agenda and encouraged some existing – mostly Christian – organisations to engage in campaigns opposing sexuality education and LGBTQI+ rights. This has resulted in some multi- and bilateral funding for community-level service provision flowing to organisations that have supported anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns and legislation (Provost et al., 2022). For example, between 2016 and 2020, donors from the US, United Kingdom, Germany and Italy spent over $5 million on projects run by or benefiting Ghanaian religious organisations whose leaders have campaigned against LGBTQI+ rights (ibid., 2022).

Islamist funding flows throughout the Muslim world are difficult to trace on the ground. One estimate that emerged in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 was that the Saudi government spent up to $75 billion after 1979 to promote Wahhabism, directly and through organisations such as the Muslim World League (Committee on Governmental Affairs, 2003). Pakistan, as one of the first countries to be impacted by such support, has received billions in Saudi loans and direct aid, along with private funding from the Gulf states. In Turkey, the current government, with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, is in a position to use state resources and institutions to implement its reforms of the education system (Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017).

Strategic alliances between different types of gender-restrictive actors

At the international level, the Christian right has made common cause with post-Soviet states, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the US to prevent or roll back progress on sexuality education (Ferreira, 2019; Venegas, 2022). With respect to sexuality education, for example, representatives of Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and Egypt targeted wording on CSE at the 2022 World Health Assembly and the Human Rights Council. Family Watch International has likewise organised protests against CSE at forums such as the 2018 Commission on the Status of Women and the 2022 Transforming Education Summit (Ipas, 2023). Regional organisations and coalitions often join their efforts to specifically block progress on reproductive choice and reproductive education at the United Nations (UN). These may include the Holy See, post-Soviet states, and others with strong influence from Catholicism or Islam on state policies, and coalitions such as the OIC, the League of Arab States, G77 or the UN Africa Group (Sanders, 2018).

US conservative Christian organisations have promoted and funded anti-LGBTQI+ legislation in many African countries (McEwen, 2020). FWI, in particular, has been active in lobbying African leaders and lawmakers to block LGBTQI+ rights, including by sponsoring trips and providing training for diplomats and politicians from other countries such as Ghana and Kenya (Cullinan et al., 2020; Byaruhanga, 2023; Kimeu, 2023). The organisation also has a memorandum of understanding with the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, a subsidiary organisation of the OIC; the memorandum aims to address the 'problems of contemporary life,' including CSE, LGBTQI+ rights and 'the rising trend of adopting relationships out of wedlock' (Ipas, 2023; Kimeu, 2023).

2 Conceptualising organised gender-restrictive activities in education

2.1 Why education?

Governments and activists of all political persuasions have long identified education as a central space to influence the values of the next generation. Education is a key tool to promote national identity and reinforce the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Lazarus, 2019; McEwen, 2020; Venegas, 2022). A moral discourse that asserts both religious and patriarchal values is a powerful tool for crafting exclusionary nationalism and maintaining unequal gender relations.

Gender-restrictive actors are committed to changing norms and worldviews in line with their beliefs – a project that they recognise to take decades (Martínez et al., 2021). Shifts in values and perspectives developed through education tend to be long-lasting; higher levels of education (post-basic education) are, overall, associated with more egalitarian attitudes to gender equality (Aslam, 2013; Kyoore and Sulemana, 2019). This means that control of education is a key site where gender-restrictive actors seek to exercise influence. As noted throughout this report, their proposals and campaigns are framed as protecting children from corrupting forces, including the 'liberal' or 'Western' ideas about sexual choice and morality that they may encounter at school.

The influence of education takes place both through the formal curriculum – the knowledge and ideas that students are exposed to in lessons – and the 'hidden curriculum', the 'unspoken or implicit academic, social and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school' (Glossary of Education Reform, 2015). School practices around gender (e.g. gendered roles and responsibilities, gender segregation of certain lessons and dress policies) and the attitudes and behaviour of peers and teachers are important channels by which the hidden curriculum is transmitted (Francis, 2023).

Recent decades have seen a renewed emphasis on transforming education systems to promote gender equality. This has involved efforts to close gender gaps in participation and completion rates, to reduce inequalities in the uptake of subjects, to prevent gender-based violence, and to promote gender-equitable values through school curricula and learning materials (UNESCO, 2022). In some contexts, efforts have also been made to reduce discrimination against LGBTQI+ students.[5] Simultaneously, there has been a concerted drive to include CSE in school curricula (UNESCO et al., 2021).

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5 These variously respond to countries' constitutional human rights frameworks, and international education-related policy processes and frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals, Education 2030 and the Transforming Education Summit (GPE, 2023).

All these initiatives have generated variable levels of resistance, often manifested through slow, partial or non-implementation of policies and programmes (World Bank, 2023; Global Partnership for Education, 2023). Gender-restrictive actors often mobilise existing resistance to sexuality education, gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights. Inspired by a more cohesive ideology, and with substantially greater funding, they can achieve a much greater degree of change than individual or institutional resistance. The next section examines their objectives, strategies and activities.

2.2 What do gender-restrictive actors seek in education, and how?

As noted in this chapter and throughout this report, the key aim of gender-restrictive actors is to generate a long-term cultural shift to (re-)establish hetero-patriarchal social norms. This long-term vision gives an overarching sense of purpose and helps these groups stay resilient in the face of short-term defeats. In pursuit of this vision, they engage in a range of activities that seek change on different timescales (Martínez et al., 2021).

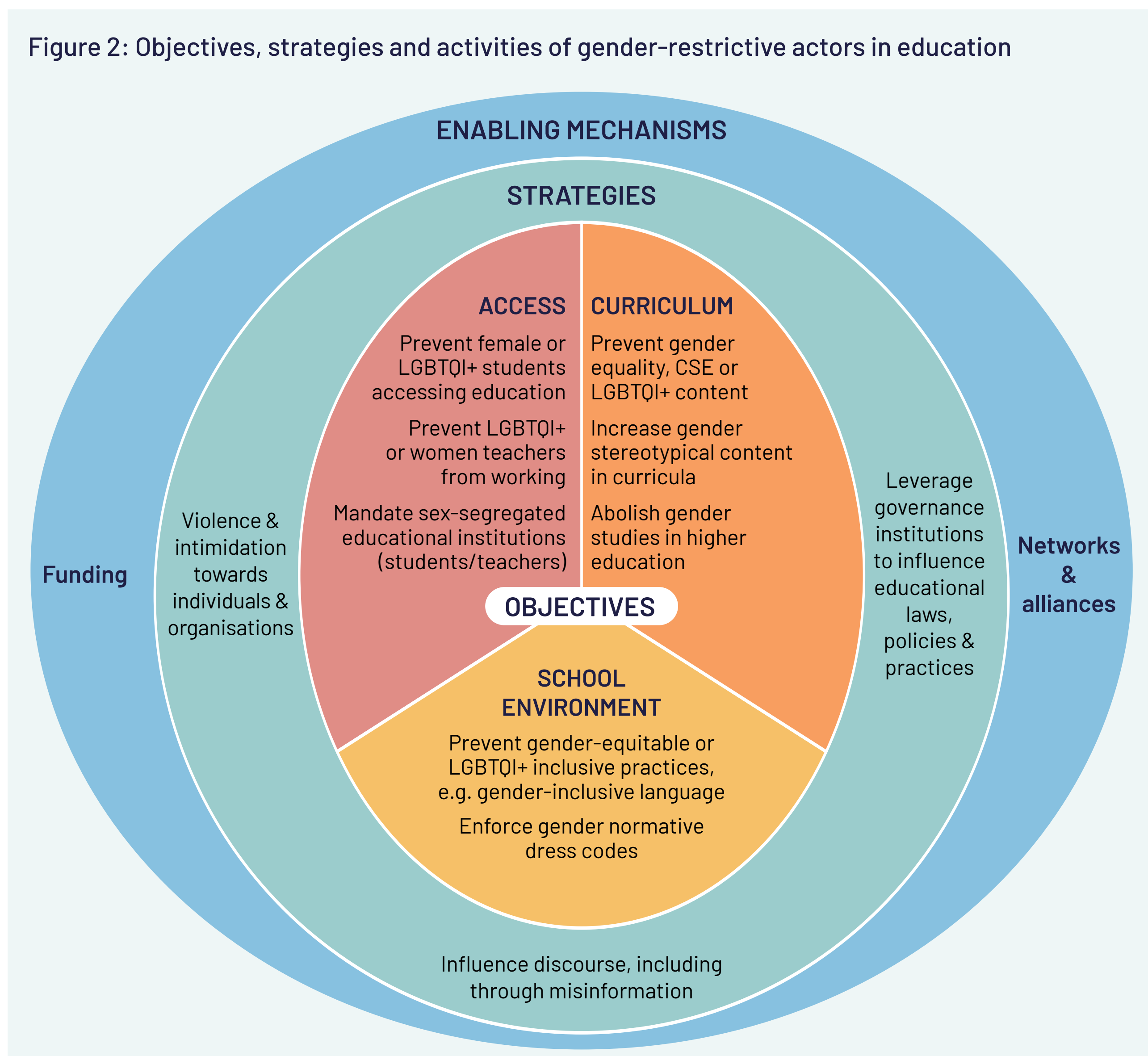
Figure 2 outlines the aims that gender-restrictive actors seek in education. It distinguishes these in relation to three areas of education policy and practice:

- **access**: who can attend school or higher education, and who can teach
- **curriculum**: particularly the content of formal curricula; much activity has focused on sexuality education[6]
- **school practices**: including gendered dress codes, language and policies around LGBTQI+ inclusion.

Figure 2 also identifies some of the key strategies that gender-restrictive actors use to achieve their aims in the education sector.

6 In some contexts, gender-restrictive actors also target what non-formal or informal information sources children and young people can access.

Figure 2: Objectives, strategies and activities of gender-restrictive actors in education



Leveraging governance institutions to influence educational laws and policies

Where gender-restrictive political leaders have achieved direct government control, they are able to influence education policies to reflect their ideological positions. In many countries this means they can (re)assert highly patriarchal values and infuse curricula with exclusionary content, as in India, Pakistan and Turkey (Saigol, 2005 ; Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017; Anand and Lall, 2022). Direct political power also enables the most regressive policies, such as the Taliban government's exclusion of girls from all but primary education in Afghanistan (Blum et al., 2019; Safi et al., 2024).

Over the years, civil society gender-restrictive movements in Latin America and Africa have lobbied politicians and sought to influence discourse, through which they have wielded considerable, largely invisible, political influence over education policy (Panchaud et al., 2019; Martínez et al., 2021). Through electoral alliances, ministerial appointments or direct service provision, conservative actors opposing gender equality have gained influence in state institutions across Latin America (Zaremberg et al., 2021). In Peru, interfaith groups have carried out strategic litigation and strengthened political alliances, often

lobbying within multilateral organisations (Martínez et al., 2021). Catholic lawyers in the region have been mobilised to contest sexual and reproductive rights, in favour of the right of parents to educate their children, and the need to protect religious freedom (Vaggione, 2018).

Some gender-restrictive groups provide significant financial support to right-wing candidates (Corrales, 2018). Interfaith alliances bolster groups' social capital and political power (e.g. in Paraguay and Ghana, where Evangelicals have joined together with Catholics, and Christians with Muslims, respectively) (Panchaud et al., 2019; Martínez et al, 2021: 83). Parent-led groups, especially families with economic or political power, have campaigned to influence government decisions around the school curriculum (e.g. in Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras and Peru) (Ronconi et al., 2023).

Gender-restrictive activists have employed similar tactics in former Soviet countries. For example, The Parents' Committee of Ukraine (PCU, Roditel'skiy Komitet Ukrainy) fostered close links with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, deputies, teachers and scientists and invited their representatives to PCU Kyiv forums (Strelnyk, 2017). The lobbying intensified when the group was trying to push through a 'safe information space' law to prohibit exposing children to information about homosexual relationships (Feder, 2013).[7] The parliament stopped reviewing the bill after pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych fled Ukraine in 2014. PCU was supported by a network of anti-rights organisations including the Orthodox Parents' Committee, the Christian Movement for Life, Love against Homosexuality and the World Congress for Families (Strelnyk, 2017).

Influencing discourse, including through misinformation

Gender-restrictive organisations and actors manipulate 'common social fears and anxieties' to shift public debate from equality and inclusion (Zaremberg et al., 2021: 530). They generate narratives using these anxieties to build public support. This section describes key tactics used to influence discourse, principally through broadcast and social media.

Mobilising a discourse of protecting children. Gender-restrictive actors frequently leverage the rhetoric of protecting children, using tropes and imagery of children in danger. In an analysis of the communication tactics used by anti-gender actors in 38 countries, Global Action for Trans Equality (GATE, 2023) found that key phrases included 'family issues' and 'children's protection from harmful education'. Children are portrayed as at risk of being taught false and ideologically biased material in school, and as vulnerable to sexualisation (with LGBTQI+ people often being equated with paedophiles). A broader risk to social order posed by feminists and LGBTQI+ people is also highlighted (Martínez et al., 2021; Ojeda and Astudillo, 2023).

Mobilising anti-colonial discourse. Gender-restrictive actors frequently portray sexuality education as a tool for inculcation of Western ideals, including acceptance or alleged promotion of homosexuality and promiscuity, and as a threat to authentic national culture (Creely and Blackburn, 2020). Anti-colonial discourse is used to legitimise persecution of LGBTQI+ people and feminists. Gender-restrictive actors paint the Sustainable Development Goals as part of a neocolonial agenda and use anti-UN rhetoric to block or limit CSE (Martínez et al., 2021; Ipas, 2023).

7 PCU lobbied for other laws, including: prohibiting abortion, redefining the definition of a married couple to eliminate the possibility of gay couples adopting children, and changing income tax rates to reflect the number of children one has (Strelnyk, 2017).

Misinformation and conspiracy theories. Discourse analyses of anti-gender campaigns reveal that they use misinformation, graphic images and hyperbolic language (Ngabaza, 2022; Ipas, 2023). From the 'gay kit' in Brazil to Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas (Don't Mess With My Kids) in much of Latin America, anti-gender movements have used catchy slogans to build their army of followers in digital and non-digital realms. Argentina's President Javier Milei described CSE as a plot by the state and leftist politicians to 'deform' children's brains, and vowed to eliminate it, along with dismantling the Ministry of Women (El Perfil, 2022). Also in Argentina, young ultra-conservative activists, especially YouTubers and influencers, have blended anti-gender narratives with pandemic-related conspiracies (Campana, 2022). These hyperbolic claims, false analogies and misinformation both try to generate panic and seek to blame certain groups, particularly LGBTQI+ people and feminists for social ills.

Strategic self-presentation. Another aspect of misinformation involves strategic self-presentation to different constituencies, to widen anti-gender movements' support bases. Martínez et al. (2021) highlight a concerted effort by these groups to 'professionalise', e.g. by forming or allying with conservative think tanks to produce well-presented peer-reviewed research, partnering with sympathetic academics and using scientific language where possible, to help generate an impression of seriousness, objectivity and depth.[8] This selective self-presentation variously aims to present these groups as reasonable, concerned citizens, while obscuring more extreme aspects of their political platforms, and hiding sources of funding and alliances that might be of concern to more moderate audiences. An associated tactic is to use human rights language, such as protection of 'the right to life', to build their arguments (Lewin, 2021).

These self-victimisation strategies, which scapegoat LGBTQI+ people and feminists, effectively reverse perceptions of who is being victimised and who is perpetrating discrimination.

Presenting people with traditional religious or conservative values as victims. Religiously backed or politically affiliated gender-restrictive groups present themselves as the victims of a liberal, 'Western' establishment (Rothermel, 2020; Dvoskin, 2022; Sanders and Jenkins, 2023). These acts are all part of a careful plan to catalyse an emotive and visceral reaction from the public and ultimately mobilise support in the crusades against 'gender ideology' (Corrêa, 2022). These self-victimisation strategies, which scapegoat LGBTQI+ people and feminists, effectively reverse perceptions of who is being victimised and who is perpetrating discrimination (Rothermel, 2020; Dvoskin, 2022; Sanders and Jenkins, 2023).

Mobilising conservative young people. Young people have become instrumental actors in gender-restrictive movements. US-based religious and conservative organisations recruit and train regional, national and local leaders from other parts of the world, including African countries (Ipas, 2023). High-level events, such as the World Youth Alliance and its regional youth summits often:

8 This sometimes involves using concepts or theories that are now seen as outdated by mainstream scientific communities.

> Operate under the guise of human rights and 'dignity for all' … while grooming youth to promote conservative values, influence global policymakers in high-level international meetings, and carry anti-CSE and anti-abortion messages back to their home countries. (ibid: 12)

Violence and intimidation

Groups that hold state power, and militant groups, use violence and intimidation as coercive tools to advance their agenda. Direct attacks on women, girls and LGBTQI+ students deprive these individuals of their right to education (McEwen, 2020; Venegas, 2022). This use of force reflects a broader strategy to enforce traditional norms and obstruct progressive educational initiatives that challenge existing patriarchal power structures. Between 2009 and 2015, there were attacks on schools in over 70 countries, with a substantial number of these attacks being directed specifically at girls, parents and teachers who advocate for gender equality in education (OHCHR, 2015: 3).

Feminist, human rights and LGBTQI+ organisations face harassment by their governments, including fines based on trumped-up charges, bans on foreign funding to their operations or forced closure (Okereke, 2023). Gender-restrictive groups more broadly sometimes use defamation, harassment and organised hate campaigns on broadcast or social media to target people advocating for gender-equitable and inclusive education (Cullinan et al., 2020).

3 Access to education: who gets to learn

Some gender-restrictive actors seek to deny girls, women and LGBTQI+ people the right to participate in education. Their exclusionary goals arise from:

1. religious or cultural justifications confining women and girls to the private sphere and restricting their access to the public sphere, and/or
2. prejudices against gender non-conforming individuals, which are similarly rooted in patriarchal norms upholding heterosexuality and a binary conception of gender (male and female).

These groups share a rejection of access to education as a human right applicable to all. This chapter discusses activities that seek to: restrict women and girls' access to education (Section 3.1), deny LGBTQI+ students access to education (Section 3.2), and control who teaches as a means of influencing either which students can attend, or the values that are taught (Section 3.3).

3.1 Restricting girls' and women's access to education

Worldwide, while most countries now recognise education as a human right, women and girls have historically been denied or restricted access due to deeply ingrained gender norms (UNESCO, 2022). These norms perpetuate inequalities by limiting educational opportunities for girls while reinforcing traditional gender roles, and they have been weaponised for political purposes to influence policies and restrict women's and girls' access to education.

The religious political movement known as the Taliban, active in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, seeks to block girls' and women's access to education altogether, and places gendered restrictions on education at the centre of its ideology (Khan, 2018). Its actions include attacks on girls, including the 2015 attack on the world-renowned Malala Yusafzai in Swat, Pakistan, and the current exclusion of girls from education institutions across Afghanistan (Ahmedi and Sultan, 2023). In 2021, the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan and implemented its gender-discriminatory policies. It began with a ban on co-education and prohibitions against males teaching females, and then shifted to a series of edicts blocking pubescent girls from attending school closing secondary schools for girls altogether. At the university level, women were first banned from teaching, and classes were gender segregated with women ordered to cover their faces in the classrooms. Next, women were stopped from taking certain courses because the Taliban deemed them too difficult and not useful for women. Finally, in December 2022, women were banned from universities altogether, but permitted to study in *madrassas* (Safi et al., 2024).

The increase in Taliban power raises concerns about its cross-border influence. Between 2018 and 2019, there were at least 12 attacks, including explosives or arson attacks, on girls' schools in Pakistan (GCPEA, 2020). When a girls' middle school in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province was attacked with explosives,

a militant group reportedly distributed pamphlets stating, 'We will not tolerate to see grown-up girls going to schools in various areas' (Gul, 2018, cited in INEE, 2021).

In Iran, the government stands accused of using violence against schoolgirls as part of a broader agenda of political suppression. After the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini in custody of the Morality Police, a series of nationwide protests began in 2022 under the slogan 'Women, Life, Freedom'. Soon, a wave of chemical attacks on schoolgirls poisoned at least 13,000 girls across the country. One study linked these incidents to the state's long-term pattern of gender discrimination. It found the poisonings were a means to suppress student protests and instil fear, through disrupting girls' access to education, noting this took place within a wider context of gender discrimination in Iran's education sector (Education International Research, 2023).

Militant anti-rights groups use the issue of girls' access to education to influence government policy towards their groups or simply to make money from ransom (Nkabala, 2014; Peters, 2014). Boko Haram, a militant group operating primarily in Northeast Nigeria and whose name means 'Western education [Boko] is forbidden', has gained notoriety for its vehement opposition to Western education (i.e. state education) as incongruent with Islamic education (Peters, 2014). It has abducted, raped and killed both Christian and Muslim schoolgirls (see Box 7). Other militant groups, including the Christian extremist Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and the Islamic Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen (known commonly as al-Shabaab) in Somalia, have used religious scripture to justify their attacks on girls' education (Nkabala, 2014; Peters, 2014).

The abduction of educated girls by military groups is both tactical and practical. Evidence from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack found that armed groups in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo specifically targeted girls and women from schools, including for sexual violence and forced marriage, and to support military operations by cooking and cleaning or participating in combat (GCPEA, 2019). In Somalia, in 2010, girls were forcibly removed from schools to become 'wives' of al-Shabaab fighters (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Some girls were abducted because they are educated. In northern Uganda, for example, the LRA targeted secondary schoolgirls, as their superior literacy and numeracy made them valuable recruits for military communications work (OHCHR, 2015).

Such violent tactics instil fear in communities about sending girls to school. In Mali, militant attacks have led some women and girls to choose to stop going to school; parents have also kept their daughters home due to fear of attacks (Martínez et al., 2013). In Uganda and Nigeria some parents took their daughters out of school and married them off to protect them from attacks (OHCHR, 2015; Diamond, 2022).

3.2 Undermining LGBTQI+ students' access to education

Although gender-restrictive actors rarely directly seek to prevent LGBTQI+ students from accessing education, their homophobic and transphobic discourse contributes to an environment that normalises discrimination and prejudice, and which is amplified through the media (Thoreson, 2019). At a policy level, this can be seen through mobilisations against inclusion of any content on gender or sexual diversity in sexuality education (see Chapter 4), and in opposition to laws or practices that would help protect LGBTQI+ students from discrimination (see Chapter 5). At its most extreme, it can also lead to an environment in which school authorities can act with impunity against LGBTQI+ students, denying them access to education.

For example, in contexts as diverse as Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda, panics over 'same-sex activity, gender transgression, and other forms of queerness' have prompted 'mass expulsions' of LGBTQI+ youth from schools (Thoreson, 2019: 266).[9] In 2013, for example, a secondary school in Uganda expelled 22 female students alleged to be lesbian, and in 2015, 19 boys in Kenya were suspended and sent home pending an investigation of homosexuality for allegedly defending the rights of LGBTQI+ people in a debate among peers (ibid.). More recently, in Uganda, after religious leaders and politicians alleged students were being 'recruited into homosexuality' in schools, authorities began to arrest and detain LGBTQI+ students and teachers (Al Jazeera, 2023).

3.3 Controlling who teaches

Teachers give voice and interpretation to curricula; they also act as role models. Controlling who teaches is thus a focus for some gender-restrictive actors. Women have been excluded from teaching boys and men in higher education, in the name of religiously justified sex segregation in Iran (Heidarifar, 2023). When the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 2021, they began to implement gender curbs on education by first restricting the subjects women could teach, and then banning women from teaching at universities (Akbari and True, 2022). In fragile or conflict-affected contexts especially, armed groups or militias often target teachers. In 2019, female teachers and instructors working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, for example, were threatened and assaulted by an armed group operating in the camps. Many stopped attending school due to fear of further attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2019, cited in INEE, 2021).

Teachers perceived to be advocates of gender equality or LGBTQI+ rights have been targeted by actors who seek to instil fear or prohibit them from teaching. In Brazil, under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, teachers and university professors came under direct threat. For example, upon his election, the incoming deputy of the state of Santa Catarina asked students to film their classes to catch 'political partisan or ideological behaviour' and anonymously report teachers (Pells, 2018, cited in McEwen, 2020). Soon after, educators reported experiencing various types of intimidation, including police invasion, prison and death threats. In 2020, a new government manual on human rights in Brazil removed the terms gender, homophobia and transphobia from its language. This led to the state justifying coercive measures on grounds of countering 'gender ideology'. For example, in November 2021, a schoolteacher and a university professor were both subjects of a criminal investigation after being reported for propagating 'gender ideologies' in school and exposing students to 'communist concepts' (Corrêa and Faulhaber, 2022). A study in 2022 by Human Rights Watch (2022a) found that 20 of the 36 teachers they interviewed across eight Brazilian states who had covered gender and sexuality topics in their teaching between 2016 and 2020 had been harassed for doing so, some receiving death threats.

Anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment often fuels efforts to remove teachers and other education personnel from positions of power. In Chile, for example, in 2007, a teacher had her certificate to teach religion revoked by the Catholic Church after she openly identified as a lesbian (Vera, 2021). Nearly 15 years later, when the case

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9 Though summative numbers are not provided, Thoreson (2019) refers to 'mass expulsions' as singular incidents when schools expel 20–30 students at a time on grounds of their sexual orientation (real or perceived).

was brought to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the Alliance Defending Freedom International, a US-based anti-rights 'faith-based legal advocacy organisation' (ADF International, n.d.) defended the state of Chile through a lesbophobic campaign (Movilh, 2021). When the court ruled in the teacher's favour, Alliance Defending Freedom International countered that the ruling undermines the autonomy of the Church and fails to protect the rights of parents to choose the education of their children (Vargas, 2022).

Gender-restrictive actors have also mobilised against efforts to prevent discrimination against LGBTQI+ students and teachers. In Costa Rica, for example, although the Ministry of Education has outlined various policies to protect LGBTQI+ students and teachers from discrimination, unnamed influential conservative groups are reported to have prevented the law's de facto application (Cortez et al., 2021).

Table 1 summarises the examples presented in this chapter.

Table 1. Summary of examples: efforts of gender-restrictive actors to control access to education

Key strategies	Key actors	Main examples found
Girls' and women's access to education		
Banning girls' or women's education	Militant groups , including de-facto governments (Taliban)	Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan
Attacking or recruiting women and girls into militias	Armed or military-affiliated groups (e.g. Taliban, Boko Haram, LRA)	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Uganda
LGBTQI+ students' access		
Expelling students labelled as LGBTQI+	Schools, teachers and other school-based personnel	Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda
Controlling teachers		
Not allowing women to teach	Governments (e.g. Taliban) and political groups (e.g. Jamaat-i-Islami)	Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan
Only allowing women to teach in segregated schools		
Targeting individual teachers, officials or politicians (e.g. firing or intimidating/harassing)	Government/supporters	Brazil
	Religious groups	Chile
	Armed groups	Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar)

4 Curriculum: what students learn

This chapter examines gender-restrictive actors' efforts to influence the representation of gender issues in curricula and learning materials (Section 4.1), their resistance towards sexuality education (Section 4.2), and their mobilisation against LGBTQI+ content and representations in the curriculum (Section 4.3).

4.1 Influencing gender-related content in school curricula and learning materials

This section first explores how gender-restrictive actors have used political power to integrate gender biases into teaching and learning materials. It then explores mobilisation by gender-restrictive actors to resist efforts to remove harmful content from curriculum and teaching and learning materials.

Deepening existing gender biases in teaching and learning materials

Teaching and learning materials often contribute to reinforcing traditional gender norms, either through deliberate policy or because the patriarchal values they embody are naturalised and rarely questioned. For example, studies from Bangladesh, Malaysia and Pakistan's Punjab province have shown that the share of female characters in the texts and images of secondary school textbooks remains below 50% (UNESCO, 2022). In Chile, Catholic schools have used educational materials with representations of men as breadwinners and household heads, messages about the importance of wives being submissive, and stereotypes representing men as more intelligent and capable than women (ibid.). Contemporary gender-restrictive actors seek to reinforce gender-stereotypical norms through educational content, by advocating for content that reinforces them, or opposing their removal.

Indeed, the increase of religious ideology in educational content can deepen gender bias as well as contribute to other forms of social exclusion. When Pakistan's curriculum underwent reforms in 1979 as part of a state-led Islamisation policy, it reinforced women's place in the domestic sphere, idealised martyrdom in the cause of fighting holy wars and reproduced negative tropes about non-Muslim religious communities (Saigol, 2005; Bradley and Saigol, 2012). In textbooks, women were portrayed as the guardians of traditions, culture and morality to protect against the influence of immoral Western culture (Saigol, 2003, 2005; Khan, 2018). More recently, Prime Minister Imran Khan similarly equated feminism with immorality and Westernisation, refuted gender progressive and rights-based policy-making (Jatoi, 2022), and brought his own reforms to infuse greater religious content into the curriculum, and to further reinforce misogynist gender stereotypes (CPPG, 2022). The religious political party Jamaat-i-Islami, which supported Khan's government, advocates for gender-segregated higher education and only depicting girls wearing the hijab in school textbooks (AFP, 2014).

As India reforms its educational curriculum in line with its Hindutva ideology, some key implications for gender are to be found in new content disparaging religious minorities. From 1998 to 2020, the Bharatiya Janata Party supported widespread revision of textbooks to portray Muslims as an aggressive group, guilty of violating Hindu property – their land, temples, cows and women. This portrayal supports the government's campaign against so-called 'love jihad', the popular discriminatory trope that Muslim men seduce Hindu women to leave their faith to marry them (Anand and Lall, 2022). These curricular reforms deepen, rather

than mitigate, patriarchal worldviews and social inequalities through the values promoted in content (Hegde, 2018) and have led to declining enrolment for Muslim students (Maniyar, 2023).

Resisting efforts to remove gender biases from teaching and learning materials

Religious institutions have effectively advanced their anti-gender agenda by resisting efforts to remove gender biases from school textbooks (Blumberg, 2008). For example, In Argentina, the 1992 education law introduced the principle of equal opportunity and mandated the elimination of stereotypes in educational materials. When the curriculum was ready to be disseminated nationally, it was attacked as anti-family by conservative parents supported by the Catholic Church, and the government ultimately adopted a 'gender-neutral' curriculum advocated for by the Church (Stromquist, 1997, cited in Blumberg, 2008). The term 'gender neutral', or 'gender blind,' curriculum refers to ignoring gender inequalities, which has the effect of perpetuating or potentially worsening inequalities (UNICEF, 2017).

Religious groups acting together with civil society have also succeeded in stalling gender-inclusive content. When Peru's Women's Ministry developed a plan in 2000 for equal opportunities for women and men, including in education, the Catholic Church succeeded in pressuring the government to remove all references to a 'gender focus' (Muñoz-Cabrejo, 2006, cited in Blumberg, 2008). More recently, the parent-led Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas (Don't Mess With My Kids) movement was founded in response to the new national basic education curriculum, which contained progressive gender content. It succeeded in reversing this inclusive language (see Box 3 and Section 4.2).

Islamic organisations, also in conjunction with civil society, have engaged in similarly restrictive efforts. The Jordanian Ministry of Education developed a 2019 Gender Equality Action Plan to eliminate gender bias and stereotypes in educational content. In response, the Jordan Teaching Association (now dissolved) and the Muslim Brotherhood objected to the reform on the grounds of secularisation and Westernisation of the curriculum. However, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a strategic opening for reform advocates to advance the proposed curriculum changes, capitalising on the weakened opposition from gender-restrictive stakeholders amidst the crisis. Still, the reformed curriculum purposefully does not reference LGBTQI+ issues due to political and social sensitivities on the subject (DAI, 2022).

4.2 Resisting comprehensive sexuality education

CSE 'gives young people accurate, age-appropriate information about sexuality and their sexual and reproductive health, which is critical for their health and survival' (WHO, 2023). CSE can help improve young people's knowledge and skills related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), ultimately reducing patterns of gender- and sexual-based violence and unintended pregnancies, and delaying the age of marriage for young women (UNESCO, 2018). It remains controversial, however, and a large body of literature analyses the challenges and barriers to its delivery in schools.[10]

10 Examples include Panchaud et al. (2019) and UNESCO et al. (2021).

Credit: Illustration by Reya Ahmed for ALIGN, 2024

CSE is a major target of gender-restrictive actors. They argue that parents, not schools, should teach children about sexuality, and prefer abstinence education and the values of family life, while also arguing against the inclusion of material on homosexuality or gender diversity. Opposition to CSE is likely to have more traction in contexts where the political environment is already sceptical of reproductive rights or conducive to anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment, e.g. in countries where abortion, contraception or sex outside of marriage is illegal, LGBTQI+ sexual activity is criminalised, or equality laws are weak (Martínez et al., 2021). It is often an alliance of high-ranking representatives of religious organisations, with CSOs (particularly parent-led advocacy groups) and, in some cases, state actors who prevent proposed reforms, or seek to restrict access to information.

Their initiatives illustrate many of the tactics outlined in Chapter 2: creating and weaponising fears around the protection of children and the imposition of 'foreign' values, scapegoating and demonisation of LGBTQI+ people, use of misinformation and hyperbole, and cross-national collaboration and coordinated action.

Opposition led by religious organisations and political leaders

Political and religious leaders successfully mobilise public concern to block CSE. Their influence in the Global South has gained momentum through global developments. For example, as a result of the Global Gag Rule,[11] reinstated by the then US President Donald Trump in 2017, funding from the President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief has been redirected to conservative organisations abroad. In South Africa, for example, an anti-LGBT organisation, Focus on the Family, received funding to teach abstinence-only sexuality education, while other organisations teaching a rights-based approach to CSE were forced to close (Lane et al., 2021).

Religious and conservative political leaders use a discourse based on fear of sexual immorality, early pregnancy and homophobia to advance their resistance to CSE (Ipas, 2023). In 2012, after a long process of civil society advocacy, the Philippine government passed the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act to offer universal access to reproductive health services, including mandating CSE into the education system (Abrigo and Paqueo, 2016; Abesamis and Siddayao, 2021). Because religious groups and the Church opposed the law, fearing it would lead to promiscuity and teen pregnancy (Abrigo and Paqueo, 2016), the core curriculum was scaled back to feature traditional families only and advocate for sex within marriage (Abesamis and Siddayao, 2021). In Barbados and multiple Latin American countries religious groups have used a discourse based on similar fears to lobby against CSE (Lazarus, 2019; Córdoba, 2022).

Political leaders often find the issue of CSE useful to build support. In Brazil, Bolsonaro supporters gained attention by lobbying against CSE under the movement Escola sin Partido ('School Without [Political] Party'). Starting as a fringe right-wing movement in 2004 (Kaiser, 2019), it gained visibility after introducing the concept of 'gender ideology' into its discourse (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). In 2014, the movement tried to establish a new curriculum to make social science and philosophy courses optional, ban sex education, and reintroduce selected courses from the dictatorship era (McEwen, 2020). Since then, lawmakers at the federal, state and municipal levels have made extensive efforts to ban what they term 'indoctrination' in schools, proposing at least 200 laws that directly or indirectly ban discussion of gender or sexuality in education. Of these, at least 20 were in force at the time of a study in 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). The Pin Parental (Parental Veto) movement originated with the far-right, ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist Spanish political party Vox. It is active in Spain and Latin America, playing on parents' anxieties to spur action in defence of their children (see Box 2) (Huerta Pérez, 2020).

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11 The global gag rule prohibits foreign NGOs receiving U.S. global health aid from offering legal abortion services or referrals, and from advocating for changes to abortion laws, even if using their own (i.e. non-U.S.) funds. The policy only permits access to abortion in cases of rape, incest, or when a woman's life is in danger (Open Society Foundations, 2019).

Box 2: The Pin Parental movement

The Pin Parental movement demands that certain topics, such as sexuality, gender identity, feminism or LGBTQI+ diversity, require parental consent to be taught in schools (Huerta Pérez, 2020). The parental veto gained substantial political ground in the Spanish government of Murcia (Bolsonaro, 2019), where the law was narrowly passed (Menárguez, 2020). The decision was contested by the central education authorities (Luis, 2021; Mazarío, 2021; Norris, 2023), and the Spanish Minister of Education who said it violated the fundamental and constitutional rights of children (MEFP, 2020).

The movement has made its way to Latin America. In El Salvador, the director of the national teacher training institute was removed from office for including sexuality in a segment of a home-learning programme. A parent-led CSO attributed the decision to the Pin Parental (López Marina, 2022). In Mexico, CSO and right-wing parties' efforts to bring in the parental veto sparked debate and concerns about its constitutionality (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2020; SemMéxico, 2020). When it was passed in one Mexican state, UNICEF warned that 'children should be treated as holders of rights, not as mere objects of protection' (García, 2020). Notably, the parental veto was also accompanied by controversial legislative changes, such as the legalisation of corporal punishment, undermining the movement's purported aim of protecting children (UNICEF, 2020).

Opposition led by parental groups

One of the most influential movements against CSE, Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas, evolved from a parent-led initiative in Peru to a collaborative and strategic movement of gender-restrictive groups in Latin America, with a presence in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay. In Peru, its activists tried to block efforts to promote CSE and gender equality, and those that seek to end discrimination based on sexual orientation (see Box 3) (Bruns et al., 2023). In Paraguay and Colombia, Catholic and Evangelical groups affiliated with the movement convinced their ministries of education to ban books dealing with sexuality from schools (Corrales, 2018). In Argentina, one of the few countries with a comprehensive law on sexuality education, the movement spread fake news about the curriculum and suggested the law promotes promiscuity and masturbation (Ronconi et al., 2023). The fear instilled in teachers led some to omit teaching the CSE content (Herrera, 2019).

Box 3: Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas campaigns against gender equality in Peru's national curriculum

Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas is a parent-led movement that originated in Peru in 2016, through the support of various CSOs with connections to Evangelicalism. Its first protest in 2017, attended by over 25,000 people, was in response to the Ministry of Education's announcement of a new national basic education curriculum that included a section addressing gender and gender roles. Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas argued that the ministry's proposal infringed upon parents' constitutional right to participate in their children's educational decisions (Article 13). In 2019, the Peruvian Supreme Court ruled in favour of the government, asserting that ample opportunities for parental involvement in the curriculum development process had been provided. The petitioners successfully lobbied Congress to initiate legislative proceedings in 2022 to eliminate the inclusion of gender equality and CSE from the national basic education curriculum (Rousseau, 2020; Monge, 2022).

In Brazil, religious and secular organisations opposing CSE in schools mobilised on the streets through public campaigns using 'Don't Mess With My Kids' slogans and defending the natural (i.e. heterosexual and binary) family (Corrêa, 2018). In the Dominican Republic, hundreds of parents joined religious and political groups to protest against the teaching of 'gender ideology' in schools with slogans, including 'Let Children be Children' (Al Momento, 2019) and a government order to create a gender policy in Dominican schools (Mota Telemín and Peralta, 2019). Catholic and Evangelical religious groups and the nationalist group Antigua Orden Dominicana (Ancient Dominican Order) were among those protesting outside Ministry of Education buildings.

Parent-led groups use digital and social media to advocate against CSE through transnational networks. FWI's Stop CSE project has a website with an interactive world map, and country-specific petitions to sign to lobby against CSE in schools. The petitions have been signed across the globe, including by anti-CSE supporters in Guyana, Cameroon and Kenya, and reaching over 22,000 signatories in Ethiopia (Cullinan et al., 2020). In post-Soviet countries, parents' groups and the state have formed an alliance, focusing primarily on controlling access to information, and thus to informal education. In Kazakhstan, for example, the Parental Union (Казахстанский Союз Родителей) argues against NGOs' engagement in informal education related to sex education and reproductive rights, under the premise that only parents should be allowed to talk to their children about such sensitive subjects (Kazsouzrod, 2024).

4.3 Excluding LGBTQI+ content from curricula

Including LGBTQI+ content in school curricula and materials underpins the education and overall well-being of individuals who identify as LGBTQI+. This is a pressing policy and human rights issue, given the high rates of bullying and victimisation that LGBTQI+ students face, which have led to higher incidence of school dropout, mental health challenges and even suicide (IBE-UNESCO, 2016; O'Malley et al., 2018).

Gender-restrictive actors resist LGBTQI+ inclusive content in school curricula through generating political controversy over the issue. In Brazil, controversy was sparked following the launch of the 2011 'School Kit against Homophobia', which consisted of brochures, posters, videos and other resources aimed at addressing gender inequality and homophobia in classrooms and schools. Religious groups and legislators representing Evangelical interest groups argued that the materials were not age-appropriate and promoted homosexuality, while Bolsonaro himself popularised the derisory term 'gay kit'. Dilma Rousseff, who was president at the time and initially supported the programme, was compelled to suspend it, citing concerns about the appropriateness of the content and the state's responsibility not to interfere in citizens' private lives (Baez et al., 2015, cited in Ronconi et al., 2023). Thus, a well-established programme seeking to advance gender equality in education was vulnerable to the influence of gender-restrictive groups, in part because it was not established by law (Ronconi et al., 2023). The incident resurfaced as a political tool during the 2018 presidential elections, when Bolsonaro leveraged it to discredit his opponent, Fernando Haddad, the Minister of Education at the time of the initial controversy (Leite, 2019, cited in Ronconi et al., 2023).

New legislation to restrict LGBTQI+ inclusive content has been adopted in some contexts. All member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union have put forward laws aimed at banning 'homosexual propaganda' to children (Edenborg, 2023). This is part of the ongoing economic and political integration between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, which emphasises their shared 'traditional Eurasian values'.

The measures taken by Kazakhstan (see Box 4) and other post-Soviet countries reflect broader repressive anti-LGBTQI+ action in the region, such as the criminalisation of non-heterosexual relationships in Uzbekistan, which has led to the prosecution and at times torture of LGBTQI+ individuals by the state (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Kupemba, 2022).

Box 4: Banning LGBTQI+ content from schools in Central Asia

In Kazakhstan, the upper house of the parliament tried unsuccessfully to pass a law in 2015 to protect children from information on LGBTQI+ human rights, labelling them as 'harmful to their health and development' (Amnesty International, 2017). In August 2023, Kyrgyzstan's president signed a law banning the dissemination of information about LGBTQI+ people and LGBTQI+ rights among minors. The law covers dissemination in schools and online, given the ease and effectiveness of online engagement with young people by pro-rights groups. This legislation mimics the 'anti-propaganda' law recently passed in Russia and Hungary (ILGA Europe, 2023). The law aims to prevent harm to children's well-being and development in the country. Individuals and NGOs caught disseminating 'harmful information' may be fined. The government also launched campaigns against LGBTQI+ organisations and activists and is working towards prohibiting foreign donor funding in this sphere.

Parental groups may work in alliance with their governments and political parties to restrict LGBTQI+ content from schools. The PCU is the key anti-LGBTQI+ rights group in Ukraine. This socially conservative parents' organisation was established in 2011 with a strong anti-EU and pro-Russia stance (Strelnyk, 2023). Working closely with the Orthodox Church, it argued that children are valuable for building a state independent from Western influences and, therefore, need protection from homosexuality. Its message was distributed through YouTube, physical teaching aids (CDs and printouts) for educators and conferences. Together with the political organisation called The Ukrainian Choice, its slogans, such as 'EU association would establish a dictatorship of homosexuality' and the EU would lead to the 'homosexualisation of Ukraine', were used to sway voters. The group also advocated for a 'safe information space' in schools that would prohibit any information about homosexual relationships (Feder, 2013).

4.4 Resisting gender and cultural studies in higher education

Gender-restrictive actors have targeted gender and cultural studies in universities. One strategy is to reduce funding for programmes in which debates over gender issues can be studied. Under Bolsonaro's presidency, the Brazilian Ministry of Education planned to eliminate public universities' investments in subjects such as philosophy and sociology, to shift financial support to 'areas that give immediate returns to taxpayers, such as veterinary science, engineering, and medicine' (Bolsonaro, 2019). Gender as a discipline in higher education remains fragile in countries like Egypt and Pakistan, due to lack of funding, restrictions on academic freedom and concerns about provoking negative responses from fundamentalist groups (Saigol and Rumi, 2020; Abouelnaga, 2023). Thus the academic freedom of gender scholars and those who advance LGBTQI+ rights through their research and teaching is violated through fear of backlash (McEwen, 2020).

A second strategy is to generate public protests against specific scholars. Right-wing political groups in Brazil protested against gender scholar Judith Butler's visit to Brazil, burning her effigy and calling

her a paedophile (Misckolci and Pereira, 2018). In 2016, student-led protests in Qatar University led to the cancellation of a lecture on women in Islam by the feminist scholar and Saudi activist Hatoon al-Fassi. Some students disagreed with al-Fassi's views on male guardianship and women's rights, viewing them as threats to 'traditional Qatari values' (Lindsey, 2017, cited in Allam, 2019).

Table 2 summarises the evidence presented in this chapter.

Table 2. Summary of examples: gender-restrictive actors influencing what students learn

Key strategies	Key actors	Main examples found
Influencing gender-related content in school curricula and learning materials		
Infusing religious or gender-discriminatory content into curricula and learning materials	Governments, religious schools (Catholic schools)	Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile, Dominican Republic, India, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Pakistan
Public campaigns/protests against gender-equitable curricula	Religious groups (Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean and Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan), parent-led groups (Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas)	Argentina, Jordan, Peru
Resisting sexuality education and curriculum content on LGBTQI+		
Public campaigns/protests, especially mobilising parents and using mis- or disinformation around CSE	Religious organisations/networks and parent organisations	Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, South Africa, Uganda
Lobbying politicians	Parent-led, or religious groups and networks (Catholic, Evangelical, Muslim, etc.) or conservative youth groups	Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Guyana, Honduras, Kenya, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines
Banning NGO provision of information on SRHR or LGBTQI+ rights	Governments (often influenced by pressure from parent-led groups)	Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan
Resisting gender and cultural studies in higher education		
Defunding gender and cultural studies	Government or political leaders	Brazil, Egypt, Pakistan
Limiting scholars' academic freedom or banning books		Brazil, Egypt, Pakistan
Public campaigns/protests, demonstrating against feminist scholars	Political groups, student-led protests	Brazil, Qatar

5 Gendered school practices: protest against change

Many standard school practices – such as the use of dress codes, and sex-segregated sports or bathroom facilities – reinforce a binary division based on sex. Gender-restrictive activity often seeks to defend sex segregation in certain areas of school life, or to challenge measures intended to create more inclusive environments for trans or non-binary students. This chapter focuses on three main areas: the use of gender-neutral language in schools (Section 5.1), gender-neutral bathrooms, changing facilities and dress codes (Section 5.2), and participation in school sports (Section 5.3).

5.1 Gender-neutral language in schools

Two aspects of gender-neutral language policies and practices have attracted the attention of gender-restrictive campaigns: the acceptability of non-gendered forms of language in school environments and learning materials, and the use of students' preferred pronouns.

In languages where nouns are gendered and verbs or adjectives must agree with the subject of a phrase, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements have driven a shift towards gender-neutral or inclusive language both in everyday speech and in more official contexts, such as in government policy and in educational settings. Originally developed by feminists to make women and girls visible in languages where the default terms are masculine,[12] LGBTQI+ activists have challenged the gender binary in language and have introduced new non-gendered terms (e.g. neo-pronouns).[13] Though some 'language purists' object to any changes, it is typically the introduction of dots or hyphens to signal different groups of people, or forms that reject the gender binary that have caused the most controversy.

In several Latin American countries (e.g. Chile, Peru, Uruguay, several Mexican states and Brazil) as well as in France, proposals to prohibit gender-inclusive language have been made or enacted (BBC News Mundo, 2022; Lankes, 2022). The issue has also become a 'battleground' over the authority of different bodies. In Brazil's Rondônia state, for example, a law was passed prohibiting gender-neutral language in public and private school classrooms and educational materials. However, it was quickly overturned by the Federal Supreme Court on the basis that the state could not make decisions regarding educational guidelines. Similarly, in the city of Belo Horizonte, where a federal deputy proposed a similar law, the mayor vetoed it (Fonseca, 2023).

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12 Examples include using masculine and feminine forms in mixed groups, such as, in Spanish, referring to *los alumnos* (male pupils) and *las alumnas* (female pupils) rather than *los alumnos* (masculine plural) for a mixed-gender group.

13 For example, in French, this commonly involves using dots to indicate possible variations of a group (for example, in the word ami.e.s, friends); in Spanish, the use of x or e to avoid gendering a person or group (e.g. Latinx instead of Latino or Latina, hije instead of hijo or hija) (BBC News Mundo, 2022; Jones et al., 2023).

Two sets of reasons – which may be intertwined or separate – contribute to organised opposition to gender-neutral language in schools. The hostility of many conservative politicians and commentators reflects opposition to feminism and/or gender diversity, or a preference to maintain traditions (Camaño and Brown, 2022). For example, in his re-election campaign, Jair Bolsonaro (the former president of Brazil), claimed that gender-neutral language 'of gays' was 'ruining our children' (Lankes, 2022).

Opposition to changes may also reflect educational concerns. This was the given reason for a ban on gender-neutral language in schools in Buenos Aires (BBC News Mundo, 2022; Monteagudo, 2022).[14] This decision and rationale was criticised by the then national Minister of Education, who argued that improving education does not mean prohibiting inclusive language (Página12, 2022). However, teachers express concerns that some forms of gender-inclusive language may, in fact, be more exclusive, for example to people with dyslexia and/or other learning difficulties, and may make it harder for young children to learn to read (Lankes, 2022; Jones et al., 2023). For this reason, before the start of the 2021 academic year in Uruguay, educational authorities issued a circular stating that the use of inclusive language must conform to the rules of Spanish (BBC News Mundo, 2022).

LGBTQI+ inclusive education policies increasingly recommend allowing students to choose their pronouns and to use their chosen names rather than those registered on legal documents, such as birth certificates. These policies are, however, controversial and they have become highly politicised. Divisions focus on two main sets of issues: acceptance or rejection of principles such as gender self-identification and 'social transition' (living in a new gender); and practical details of arrangements (e.g. whether certain provisions should apply at any age or only for adolescents, and when parents should be informed of a child's request to use different names or pronouns in a school setting).

The review found few examples of such policies, or of protests against them in the regions of focus. However, the protests in South Africa discussed in Section 5.2 included pushback against the use of queer students' preferred pronouns. In Chile, instructions from the education ombudsman (circular 0768) required schools to allow students to use their 'social name' while keeping their legal name on official documents, allowing them to choose their uniform or clothing of preference. Schools were also required to establish 'inclusive bathrooms' (Santibáñez, 2017; Vargas, 2017). The Episcopal Conference of Chile organised opposition, claiming that the government decision was an unfair 'imposition' on which there had not been proper consultation (Vargas, 2017).

5.2 Gender-neutral bathrooms, changing facilities and dress codes

Gender-neutral school toilets and changing facilities have become a 'touchpoint' in culture wars. LGBTQI+ rights campaigners argue that providing gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities can reduce bullying and support the inclusion of gender-diverse children (Porta et al., 2017). Campaigners opposed to schools providing these facilities raise various objections – some disagreeing with the principle of schools even acknowledging gender diversity among students. Others note that single-sex facilities serve an important

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14 This ban may, however, also reflect the political interests of the actors involved: the mayor of Buenos Aires represented a right-wing party while the then national government was left-leaning.

role in helping protect girls from sexual violence and harassment, and enable them to manage menstruation. They are thus concerned that campaigns for gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities may end up dismantling measures put in place to address a major barrier to girls' education in some contexts.

However, campaigns often misrepresent policies and proposals. Proposals for gender-neutral facilities typically enable or encourage schools to make provision for gender-diverse children; they do not require single-sex facilities to be removed. Campaigns, however, frequently imply this is the case, as in South Africa (see Box 5).

Box 5: Protest against LGBTQI+ inclusive school policies in South Africa

In South Africa, both the Western Cape Education Department and the national Department of Education have drafted guidelines for schools on inclusion of LGBTQI+ students (SABC News, 2022). These aimed to meet legal obligations to protect the rights of LGBTQI+ students, and to provide guidance to school governing bodies and education departments facing litigation on these issues (SABC News, 2022; Department of Basic Education, 2023). The draft guidelines proposed various measures to promote safe and inclusive schools for LGBTQI+ students, including allowing gender-neutral uniforms and toilets.

After the Western Cape province's guidelines were developed, members and representatives of the African Christian Democratic Party held a protest outside the province legislature, arguing that the decision promoted 'gender ideology' and could lead to indoctrination of children (Sukers, 2021; Charles, 2022). An online petition, titled 'No to unisex bathrooms for schools in South Africa', received almost 90,000 signatures (Bhengu, 2022). The guidelines were misrepresented as allowing or requiring schools to get rid of single-sex toilets, rather than giving them the option to add gender-neutral toilets (Charles, 2022; Davids and Shepherd, 2024). The campaigns also claimed that policies had already become law, ignoring the fact that a consultative process on the guidelines was planned (Bhengu, 2022).

In Colombia proposals for gender-neutral bathrooms in schools and/or universities have also led to protest. For example, in 2016, a Ministry of Education-led proposal, including for gender-neutral bathrooms, led to protests in major cities across the country, involving parents, children, teachers and other education personnel, and leaders and representatives of Catholic and Evangelical groups. As well as protesting against the proposal, they demanded the dismissal of Gina Parody, the Minister of Education at the time (El Heraldo, 2016). Parody, who also publicly identifies as a lesbian, was accused of wanting to impose homosexuality on children, and resigned from office within months (El Tiempo, 2016; Semana, 2016).

Gender-neutral dress codes

School uniform policies or dress codes may reinforce or help challenge discrimination related to gender or sexual diversity. School uniforms and dress codes help maintain patriarchal social norms through surveillance and control of the bodies of girls and young women, and reinforce physical stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Harbach, 2015; Neville-Shepard, 2019). They also often contribute to sustaining gender binaries, presenting challenges for students with more diverse gender identities, as well as for cisgender and heterosexual students who dislike gender-stereotypical clothing (Glickman, 2015; Cumming-Potvin, 2023). In some countries and educational settings, repeated refusal to wear a gendered uniform or to comply with

Credit: Illustration by Reya Ahmed for ALIGN, 2024

gendered rules about hair style or length can be grounds for expulsion.[15] In contexts where girls' uniforms have traditionally involved wearing dresses or skirts, these have been identified as a contributing factor to lower rates of physical activity among girls.

Recent years have seen shifts to gender-neutral uniforms in some countries, states or cities (e.g. Kerala state, India; Mexico City; and Western Cape, South Africa). Overall protests against these changes appear isolated and not to have affected policies (Lopez, 2019; Ellis-Petersen and Shaji, 2022). However, in the Philippines, conservative Christian politicians have fomented opposition to a proposed law to outlaw discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, including in educational institutions (de Guzman, 2023).

5.3 School sports

School sports have also become the focus of some gender-restrictive actors. This takes two main forms: restrictions on what sports girls can play or attire considered appropriate when doing so; and efforts to promote 'manly' sports for boys as part of building strong, tough, masculine men. Though in Europe and North America policies on gender-diverse children's participation in school sports have become another 'flashpoint', this review found no examples in the regions of focus. Given this politicisation of school sports among the funders of gender-restrictive campaigns in other parts of the world, they may become a new area of attention in some countries of the Global South.

Promoting masculinity through specific sports

Historically, sports have been seen as a way of developing 'masculine qualities' in boys, such as physicality, aggression and dominance (Buzuvis, 2011, cited in Mugerwa-Sekawabe, 2023). This review found examples of states emphasising the importance of sports to develop the forms of masculinity they perceive as desirable. In 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Education published plans to 'cultivate masculinity' and prevent the 'feminisation of male adolescents'. This will involve hiring more male physical education teachers to 'exert a masculine influence in schools', testing students more comprehensively in physical education and, overall, focusing on ingraining the 'spirit' of masculinity (Allen, 2021; Roberts, 2021). In Russia in 2016, the president's office announced that approximately seven million copies of one of Putin's co-authored books on judo would be handed out to Russian primary school children, with the aim of 'forming athlete fighters and a harmonious personal upbringing' (Goretti and Mariconti, 2023). This is just one example of Putin's broader discourse, which ties together hypermasculinity, heteronormativity and the importance of strong leadership to combat both the moral decay and perceived political weakness associated with enemies both in the West and within.

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15 This was documented in the Philippines, where, as of 2017, some universities had policies allowing the expulsion of students who repeatedly violated the dress code (e.g. by cross-dressing) (Thoreson, 2017).

Girls' participation

Historically, in many contexts girls and young women have often been excluded from sports and athletics by traditional gender norms that viewed tight or revealing clothing or sporting activity as inappropriate (Laar et al., 2019). These attitudes are mobilised by some gender-restrictive actors. For example, Pakistan's Islamist political party, Jamaat-i-Islami often protests against any public show of girls' athleticism, including their participation in bicycle rallies, claiming they violate religious and cultural norms (Ullah, 2024). One study of barriers to girls' and women students' participation in sports in Pakistan found that perceived opposition by 'religious extremists and influential people' was an important perceived barrier (Ge et al., 2022). Until 2017, girls were not allowed to take part in sports in public schools in Saudi Arabia, and state-imposed restrictions continue to limit their participation (Alruwaili, 2020). In Afghanistan, the Taliban have also banned sports for women and girls (Dalgaard, 2022).

Table 3 summarises the evidence presented in this chapter.

Table 3. Summary of examples: gender-restrictive actors influencing school practices

Key strategies	Key actors	Main examples found
Campaigns against using gender-neutral language in schools	Conservative Christian or political groups and individuals, and parent-led groups	Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, Uruguay
Campaigns against gender-neutral bathrooms, school facilities and dress codes		Chile, Colombia, South Africa
Prohibiting girls from playing sports, promoting hegemonic masculinity through sport	Governments and/or political leaders	Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia

6 Countering gender-restrictive activities in education

This chapter presents emerging evidence on strategies for resisting gender-restrictive actors in education. It focuses on five key approaches: leveraging the law and human rights frameworks (Section 6.1); engaging in policy advocacy and dialogues (Section 6.2); building support for gender-equitable initiatives from stakeholders (Section 6.3); countering misinformation (Section 6.4); and public protest (Section 6.5). It also highlights two key enabling factors: political leadership, and broader allyship and funding support (Section 6.6).

6.1 Mobilising human rights legislation

Human rights legislation has been used by both gender-restrictive and pro-gender equality actors in relation to education. In countries with supportive legal frameworks, such as constitutional commitments to equality, human rights or equal rights to education, pro-equality actors have been able to challenge gender-restrictive laws, and in some cases these have been overturned. For example, in Brazil, despite threats from Bolsonaro and his supporters, the Supreme Court has played a critical role in overturning both state and municipal laws seeking to directly or indirectly ban gender and sexuality education (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). As noted in Section 5.1, the Federal Court also struck down laws and guidelines restricting the use of gender-inclusive language in schools.

In 2020, after the parental veto was proposed by various Mexican state authorities – and successfully passed in the state of Aguascalientes – the Government of Mexico publicly denounced the reforms as unconstitutional, for violating national and international human rights frameworks protecting children. Collective resistance by the state, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and various CSOs led a federal judge to suspend the parental veto three months after it was passed in Aguascalientes (SemMéxico, 2020).

Strategic litigation holds promise for establishing girls' and/or LGBTQI+ education rights in contexts where these are contested. For example, feminist lawyers took Sierra Leone's ban on adolescent mothers returning to school to the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States, which ordered the government to rescind the ban (Human Rights Watch, 2022b). In Pakistan, a leading feminist lawyer, Hina Jilani, used the constitutional right to equality of citizens to argue against the discriminatory quota limiting girls' access to medical colleges, thereby facilitating their access to co-educational universities based on merit (Khan et al., 2019). Based on an analysis of gender-restrictive activity in the political sphere, Sosa (2021) highlights the resilience human rights bodies have shown and underscores the potential of regional courts. She argues that their impact could be increased by lawyers and other human rights actors engaging proactively with civil society, for instance by offering training to communicators and grassroots organisations, or making case law more accessible to laypersons.

Using argumentation built on the language of human rights and associated constitutional provisions permits robust cases to be made on a variety of inclusion issues. For example, scholars have argued that transgender students in South Africa ought to be permitted to wear a school uniform that corresponds to their gender identity, to uphold their rights enshrined in the African Children's Charter and constitution (Kreuser and Payne, 2022).

6.2 Policy dialogue and advocacy

Like their gender-restrictive counterparts, pro-gender equality CSOs have long engaged in policy dialogue in support of CSE, and to motivate action to address the challenges faced by girls and LGBTQI+ students (Herrera Valderrábano et al., 2021; Panchaud et al., 2019). CSOs' practical contributions, such as developing learning materials, or running non-formal education activities or training programmes, can also mean they are positioned as trusted actors with expertise (UNESCO et al., 2021).

For example, in Mexico, CSOs have helped build political support by advocating for CSE from both a public health and human rights perspective through technical expertise, statistical evidence and public policy proposals (ibid.). This approach has resulted in their active participation in international decision-making spaces and collaborations with Mexican authorities and international organisations (Herrera Valderrábano et al., 2021). In Peru, Guatemala, Ghana and Kenya, CSO campaigns have effectively kept CSE on the political agenda, shaping legislation and raising awareness among the public, opinion leaders and policy-makers (Panchaud et al., 2019).

The influence of CSOs varies across countries and is partially shaped by their financial, political or social capital. For example, Panchaud et al. (2019) found that where CSOs have been able to organise formal coalitions, rather than working independently to implement projects at the classroom or school level, they have had greater influence on policy and practice. Better funded, larger organisations are often able to wield greater influence than those that are smaller and less well-funded or connected. Clearly, it is also easier for CSOs to keep up pressure for gender-equitable policies, and against gender-restrictive action, where there is greater civil space and a more favourable legal environment – such as where there are laws underpinning CSE (Ronconi et al., 2023) or where homosexuality is not criminalised (Martínez et al., 2021).

6.3 Building support for gender-equitable education from key stakeholders

Efforts to involve faith leaders and parents in CSE design and implementation can increase the likelihood of sustainable programmes, and can garner support and buy-in. As the consultative processes around the revised Peruvian curriculum have shown, providing opportunities for discussion in the early stage of a process does not necessarily help reconcile very different worldviews. Still, clarifying misconceptions early on (e.g. regarding the importance of relationships education for younger students and the age at which information will be shared) may help foster a shared understanding across groups with different political or religious views (UNFPA, 2021).

Framing initiatives intelligently is also crucial. For example, in Czechia, an NGO providing CSE materials developed for use in the formal school curriculum framed these as providing education to promote 'respectful partnerships between young people', avoiding the charged language of comprehensive sexuality education (Park, 2023). Box 6 provides an example from a CSO in Pakistan, which framed educational materials as life skills-based education, rather than CSE.

Box 6: Aahung and life skills-based education in Pakistan

Since 1995, Aahung, a CSO based in Karachi, Pakistan, has worked to promote SRHR for young people in Pakistan. It has developed teaching modules for schools and medical curricula and trained thousands of teachers and healthcare providers to use its materials. The organisations have addressed deeply rooted social norms, by adapting UNESCO's *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* to ensure educational content, tools and language are culturally relevant and sensitive to the communities they serve.

For example, to avoid criticisms from religious political parties and the stigmatisation associated with the term 'sexuality education', they label their content as life skills-based education. This adaptation helped to craft a positive public perception of their efforts in a highly patriarchal and conservative context, and facilitated access to over 200,000 students. Strategies for achieving this success over decades of effort include consistent engagement with local leaders and communities to address sensitivities, tactful framing and directly engaging adolescents' support (Svanemyr et al., 2015).

Aahung has also worked closely with boys and parents within communities, recognising the need to engage with all stakeholders to build support. Adolescent girls have said they experienced enhanced confidence, understanding of their rights and self-awareness from the life skills-based education modules taught in their secondary schools (Jahangir and Mankani, 2020).

6.4 Countering mis- and disinformation

Research on countering misinformation (incorrect information) and disinformation (intentionally spread misinformation) suggests that a multi-pronged approach is needed. These include debunking misinformation, with accurate information from trustworthy sources and sufficient detail about why the claim is false, or 'prebunking' – warning people that others may try to manipulate them with specific falsehoods. This needs to be repeated frequently as details of arguments and accurate information fade over time, leaving audiences still remembering the initial misinformation they have encountered (American Psychological Association, 2023). Another important approach is to direct accurate information at the intended audience to move it 'in more productive directions' (Christopher and Matthews, 2016). Building critical digital skills is also critical, requiring a more systemic approach to reach both young people through education and adults through various channels, including workplaces (Goodman and Livingstone, 2020). Structural solutions include greater regulation and social media companies taking greater responsibility for preventing mis- and disinformation on their platforms (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Many CSOs have responded principally by providing accurate information online and through non-formal education. For example, in Kazakhstan, young activists have developed resources – like the website UyatEmes.kz – to teach parents and young people about sexuality and reproductive health. In 2021, the founders of UyatEmes.kz, with support from UNESCO, created a multilingual chatbot for social media and instant messaging app Telegram. The chatbot – Aspan – uses artifical intelligence to answer users' questions about sexuality and health (UNESCO, 2021) and is able to reach an estimated 30,000 young people every year.

Pro-rights advocates have also developed engaging documentaries, but they are less effective given their length and the attention they require. Activists have also created Instagram and TikTok content to reach young people directly, to counter the (mis)information on these platforms supported by well-funded

parental associations.[16] Another common approach is to strengthen digital literacy skills – both through formal education and in non-formal initiatives – to educate children and adults about online abuse and misinformation.

6.5 Protests, grassroots mobilisation and alternative educational provision

As groups directly affected by efforts to restrict education, youth activists have vocally advocated for gender equality in education, LGBTQI+ rights and CSE. Across the globe, the number of protests led by students and youth has increased over recent years, from just 53 between 2006 and 2010 to 177 between 2016 and 2020.[17] Analysis from Latin America indicates that gender-focused activism is an emerging trend in recent movements in schools and university campuses, as students protest against structural and gender-based violence, authoritarianism, neoliberalism and gender inequality (e.g. in Chile, Honduras, Nicaragua and Mexico) (Ordorika, 2022). In India, hundreds of students – predominantly female – protested in response to schools banning the hijab in the state of Karnataka (De Chowduri, 2022). Muslim students also signed and filed petitions to challenge the government, however, to little avail (Associated Press, 2022). A high court in Karnataka later defended the government and upheld the hijab ban (ibid.).

Some young activists partner with international organisations and strengthen alliances to mobilise action (Ipas, 2023). For instance, with the support of the Global Partnership for Education, youth leaders have called for gender equality in areas that anti-rights actors target, such as CSE in public schools and policies that protect access for pregnant teens and young mothers (Mbuthia and Nyongesa, 2021). Some initiatives, like the Malala Fund, seek to support girls themselves as leaders in their communities to become champions of education.

In addition to in-person demonstrations and protests, student- and youth-led activism increasingly involves online mobilisation. A study from Chile, for example, highlights that high school students have been able to use Facebook to engage in political action and exercise voice in feminist student-led social movements (Errázuriz, 2021). Social media allows its users to amplify traditional protest methods and connect with the public using multimedia, and a combination of text and images. As administrators of private Facebook pages, students had power over who has access to the site, and they can therefore control how their stories are told (ibid.).

Boko Haram's kidnapping of 278 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Nigeria, triggered a women-led movement and online campaign under the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. There has been substantial research conducted on the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) movement, particularly as it has garnered both domestic and international support, which has been sustained over the years (see Box 7). The movement ultimately contributed to securing financial and military aid for the Nigerian government, prompting government action leading to the release of one group of kidnapped girls (Aina et al., 2019). An estimated 100 remained missing 10 years after the kidnapping (Kimeu and Adetayo, 2024).

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16 Interview with Kazakhstani youth rights activists, October 2023.

17 These numbers were compiled based on media reports of protests.

Box 7: The Bring Back Our Girls movement

The successes achieved by the Bring Back Our Girls movement can be attributed to several key factors. It has maintained a non-violent approach and politically neutral stance, garnering widespread support within and outside Nigeria. BBOG's strategies involved the parents and families of the abducted girls, men, young people, community organisations and international actors, which ensured sustained membership and global attention. The leveraging of contemporary media platforms, especially Twitter, attracted a young audience and propelled BBOG to global prominence.

Beyond online activism and street protests, it trained its members in life skills, such as public speaking. BBOG provided a platform for members to voice their concerns and directly confront those in power, on a national and international scale and by using evidence to challenge authority (Aina et al., 2019; Atela et al., 2021). Gaining global attention, including the support and endorsement of Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai and other world figures, the BBOG movement exposed the Nigerian government's failures to international scrutiny, and called attention to the mainstream media's failure to produce effective counterterrorism messaging (Adebiyi, 2020).

CSOs have also mobilised with networks of activists to provide education for groups without access. For example, in Afghanistan, many girls and young women are continuing their education by attending secret schools within homes or online, at great risk to their own security (Safi et al., 2024). Schools for transgender students have been established through civil society efforts, e.g. in Argentina (Alcoba, 2019; Ruiz et al., 2023), Chile (Associated Press, 2019), India (BBC News, 2016) and Pakistan (PTI, 2022).

6.6 Enabling factors: political leadership, allies and support

Given that a key strategy of gender-restrictive actors is to seek office in state or governance institutions from the national to local level, the role of politicians in resisting anti-gender political activity is critical.

While the inaction of some governments has perpetuated gender-based discrimination and hindered the progress of gender-equitable education, in other countries, political leaders stand out as having actively denounced gender-restrictive rhetoric and policies (OHCHR, 2015; Martínez et al., 2021). For example, in Ghana in 2019, after the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values claimed that the government CSE curriculum was part of an 'LGBT agenda', the president quickly intervened, clarifying the curriculum's content (Martínez et al., 2021).[18] In 2017, the Ukrainian education minister prohibited school parental committees linked with parental veto movements in other countries (Chanel 24, 2018), including Russia (Shtein, 2023). Given that a key

18 In 2024, Ghana's parliament passed the Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values bill to impose jail time for those identifying as LGBT (up to three years) or promoting LGBT-supportive activities (up to five years) (Naadi, 2024).

strategy of gender-restrictive actors is to seek office in state or governance institutions from the national to local level, the role of politicians in resisting anti-gender political activity is critical.

At an international level, UN agencies and other human rights organisations have played a role in denouncing violations of human rights, such as violence against girls and LGBTQI+ communities, or efforts to undermine CSE in schools (UNICEF, 2020). International financial, organisational, technical and moral support have also played an important role in helping governments and CSOs resist organised gender-restrictive activity. For example, the UN Population Fund has enabled cross-national communication among activists in around 50 low-income countries advocating for young people's access to sexual health and reproductive rights education. This support also helps create alternative education spaces for educators, parents and young people to learn about gender outside of the mainstream educational curriculum.[19] UNESCO's Our Rights, Our Lives, Our Future programme across 33 African countries helped to keep CSE on the political agenda and contributed to new laws and rulings supporting adolescent and youth SRHR (UNESCO, 2023).

Studies highlight the deficiencies of the model of funding that is available to pro-equality and human rights actors. This is often small-scale and projectised and requires extremely detailed reporting, which can serve as a distraction from their work: one of the activists interviewed in Croatia observed that the effect of such funding is that activists 'stay out of the streets, because you are doing paperwork' (Park, 2023: 51).

By contrast, not only is the funding gender-restrictive actors receive larger-scale, it has long-term time horizons, and is aimed at a shift in societal norms rather than very specific goals (Martínez et al. 2021; Park, 2023). A shift in orientation to provide much more useful (long-term, less restrictive) funding for pro-gender equality organisations is essential to enable them to engage more effectively in the positive strategies outlined in this chapter (Tant and Rodriguez, 2022).

19 Interview with Kazakhstani youth rights activists, October 2023.

7 Conclusion

This review of literature on organised gender-restrictive actors in education reveals a multifaceted and complex landscape. This report has sought to make two main contributions. First, it draws together global evidence to demonstrate the scale and diversity of gender-restrictive actors in education. Second, it distinguishes three main areas of gender-restrictive activity in education: access, curriculum and school practices. The report integrates insights from a deliberately wide range of contexts in the Global South, to allow readers to see a fuller range of interconnections and patterns in organised gender-restrictive activities than may previously have been possible. In so doing, it also highlights emerging evidence for how these activities are being resisted, and suggests ways forward to support those efforts.

7.1 Who are the main gender-restrictive actors in education?

This report focuses on organised political gender-restrictive actors in education, while recognising that this organised activity influences discourse more broadly, creating an environment for a wider range of actors to undertake anti-gender equality initiatives. Gender-restrictive actors are diverse, and include political parties, religious organisations, militant groups, CSOs and media organisations (as shown in Figure 1). They all seek to influence education systems to promote highly patriarchal, heteronormative visions of society, sexuality and family life. The geographical diversity of examples – from six world regions – underscores the scale at which such organised efforts operate, the transnational connections between these actors, and thus the pervasive challenges for organisations and people who seek to promote gender equality in and through education.

7.2 What strategies do they use?

Some actors use physical attacks, harassment and organised hate campaigns to influence education policy and practice.

The analysis has sought to identify common patterns, objectives and tactics that gender-restrictive actors are using to influence their key areas of focus (as shown in Figure 2). These organisations and their networks often leverage political, social and financial capital, through transnational ties and funding flows, to impact national policies. This review has distinguished key overarching strategies: influencing governance institutions at various levels; influencing discourse to shape norms and garner support for campaigns, actions or legislation; and using violence or intimidation.

To implement these strategies, gender-restrictive actors employ a range of tactics. These include generating mis- and disinformation to generate moral panics, scapegoat marginalised groups, and mobilise conservative religious or political networks, and especially parents. To exert power through governance institutions, they influence or enact laws and policies that align with their objectives, often through lobbying, occupying positions of political leadership, or seeking to remove pro-gender equality or LGBTQI+

rights champions from office. Some actors use physical attacks, harassment and organised hate campaigns to influence education policy and practice.

7.3 How does gender-restrictive activity reflect or seek to influence societal norms?

The relationship between gender-restrictive activity in education and societal norms is multifaceted. The overarching aim of gender-restrictive actors is to shift or reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative values and norms. They view education as a strategic space for spreading these values to new generations, thereby entrenching these norms more deeply over time. Gender-restrictive actors often present their agendas as representing authentic, natural norms, often grounded in religious or cultural values, and as standing up against 'Western' or overly liberal elite values. In practice, this involves amplifying the restrictive norms and visions of some segments of society, which do not necessarily represent the views of the majority. While their influence in some contexts may be seen as relatively recent, such as the role of Christian-funded groups in generating a 'moral panic' about CSE in many African and Latin American countries, in other parts of the world the gender-restrictive approach of Islamist groups has been influencing curricular content for many decades.

7.4 What are the commonalities and differences between approaches in different regions?

Some of the approaches identified, such as preventing women or girls from accessing education, highlight the extreme risks posed by violent groups and ideological actors in this area. They have prevented or sought to prevent girls from attending school and female teachers from teaching in Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, Somalia, Uganda, northern Nigeria, parts of the Sahel, among other contexts. Other approaches – such as expelling students perceived to be LGBTQI+ – have principally been documented in one region (sub-Saharan Africa), suggesting further evidence may exist in other contexts. Still others, such as impeding gender-equitable or LGBTQI+ inclusive practices in schools, CSE or other content, are common across the world regions covered by this review.

Research indicates that where the broader policy context does not promote gender equality and inclusion, and indeed if it does not protect vulnerable groups from discrimination, then these strategies achieve greater negative impact. Thus, for example, a Mexican court could rule that the parental veto was unconstitutional, while CSE suffered a major setback when Kyrgyzstan's government banned dissemination about LGBTQI+ rights and identities among minors.

7.5 Resistance strategies

The review has also revealed counter-strategies employed by gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights activists in education. These include mobilising human rights legislation, policy dialogues and advocacy, underscoring the importance of a supportive political and legal context to ensure gender inclusion. Coalition-building, countering mis- and disinformation, and engaging in direct forms of protest and grassroots mobilisation are all

strategies that progressive actors rely on, if civic space remains open and amenable to their voices. The review also found some successful efforts by civil society stakeholders in countering disinformation and strategically using social media to provide accurate information to young people, particularly on sexuality and human rights issues. Advocacy and research organisations have made significant efforts to design culturally responsive content and curricula and to work with education systems to implement them. Using framing and terminology that speaks to areas of common concern may also help prevent myths from taking hold.

More effective use of gender-equitable legal frameworks through strategic litigation appears a promising, but under-used approach, possibly due to limitations of judicial independence and process in many countries.

Such efforts appear more likely to succeed when pro-gender equality and LGBTQI+ activists have mobilised the support of political leaders, influential gender champions and progressive international agencies. In some cases, politicians have upheld constitutional provisions for gender equality and used existing legislation to guarantee broad school curricula or inclusion of all. More effective use of gender-equitable legal frameworks through strategic litigation appears a promising, but under-used approach, possibly due to limitations of judicial independence and process in many countries.

Overall, these actions are only partially countering the broad spectrum of tactics employed by gender-restrictive organisations. This disconnect may be linked to the current challenges facing rights-based political leaders, such as shrinking civic space, backlash against feminism and the decline of rights-based politics. It is likely also to reflect discrepancies in funding levels, with rights-based NGOs struggling to receive adequate and long-term funding flows, while the networks of gender-restrictive and anti-rights actors appear stronger and better funded than advocates for gender equality in education. Given the high-level political allyship that anti-equality groups have achieved in recent years, progressive activists will need to craft stronger political support, and work very strategically, to counter their influence and the long-term threat they pose to human rights and inclusivity.

7.6 Further research to address evidence gaps

This literature review has found that the evidence is uneven, with a number of gaps. The following promising areas for study are suggested:

- **Geographic scope**. Despite reviewing literature in six languages from five continents, most of the evidence identified was from Africa and Latin America. Further efforts to document the scale and nature of gender-restrictive activity in education in South East Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa would be valuable.
- **Details on gender-restrictive transnational networks within regions**. It would be valuable to understand how organisations are making an impact in regions for which the review found less evidence has been generated – Central Asia and the Middle East, for example.

- **Teachers' and school leaders' experiences**. Though gender-restrictive mobilisation limits both the educational environment schools can provide and what teachers can actually teach, there is little research into how these activities affect their practice and well-being as professionals. Research has also generally paid little attention to the role of teacher associations and unions in implementing or resisting gender-restrictive education policies.
- **The use of local school governance structures**. Research could investigate how entities such as school management committees or parent-teacher associations promote gender-restrictive agendas.
- **Evolving foci of gender-restrictive campaigns**. The priorities of gender-restrictive campaigners in countries shift over time as new issues become salient, reflecting the interplay of local dynamics and the priorities of gender-restrictive actors in transnational networks, which typically respond to their domestic political context. Issues for which the review found little evidence in the Global South (e.g. efforts to restrict school library materials, LGBTQI+ students' participation in sports) may become flashpoints and it is important to monitor emerging issues.[20]

The effectiveness of some resistance strategies is the most under-researched area in the review. Further examination of the following is suggested:

- **National legal frameworks.** It is important to understand how these protect the education sector from the influence of gender-restrictive activities. For example, the review did not find evidence of legal action against online hate speech or misinformation circulated by gender-restrictive actors targeting teachers and schools.
- **Strategic litigation.** Research is needed to understand the long-term impact of jurisprudence to protect gender equality in education, including in access, content and school practices.
- **Consultative processes to build stakeholder support for gender-equitable education.** Building on evidence from challenging contexts where some political support for CSE has been achieved, further research is needed to learn from how stakeholder support was constructed and gender-restrictive opposition to these initiatives was successfully countered.

7.7 Recommended ways forward

Reflecting on the experiences in education which are examined in this report, countering the resurgence of gender-restrictive discourse and action will require action at multiple levels. These include:

At the international level: International and donor organisations and advocacy groups need political and financial support to defend and reinforce commitments to globally agreed human rights frameworks and socially equitable values. They must monitor and regulate the unaccountable transnational funding flows that support anti-rights actors and organisations. Global cooperation is needed to regulate social media disinformation and online hate.

20 For example, as this report was being finalized, evidence emerged of bans on books dealing with themes related to race, gender or LGBTQI+ sexualities and identities (Rogero, 2024).

At national and subnational levels: All learners should be able to rely on governments to protect their rights to education and freedom from gender-based persecution or exclusion. The advancement and protection of these rights requires an enabling environment with rule of law, open civic space, and political support for gender equality and inclusion. Research indicates that where laws exist mandating inclusion, along with constitutional commitments to gender equality and non-discrimination, they need to be more proactively implemented. Social media disinformation needs to be countered by credible and accessible sources of information for children, youth, parents and community leaders. The inadequate and highly restricted funding flows to pro-equality and human rights actors need to be addressed, to counter the less accountable and more extensive funding flows of gender-restrictive organisations and support long-term effective strategising among progressive advocacy groups locally.

Among civil society: CSOs need to strengthen monitoring of gender-restrictive activities in education, and require funding support and political backing to deepen the impact of existing strategies and develop new ones, to counter these activities. They further need to strengthen media/digital literacy among citizens and work more closely with media to enhance gender-inclusive discourse. Collaboration between CSOs, including young people whose rights to inclusive and effective education (or in extreme cases, to any education) are being violated, needs to be supported.

In education systems: This report provides evidence of how the education sector has been instrumentalised for the political and ideological objectives of gender-restrictive actors. The evidence for how those working within the sector are countering this impact needs to be gathered and assessed before context-specific recommendations are possible. Given the findings of the report, however, some overarching comments are possible:

- To counter the enabling social, cultural and political environment for gender-restrictive interventions in education, it is vital to mainstream gender-equitable values within education systems so that anti-gender equality ideas have less opportunity to take root. Entry points include education sector planning processes, teacher professional development (both pre- and in-service), curricula and learning materials.
- To prepare students to contend with the polarised debates around gender equality, they need strengthened critical thinking skills and sound training in media and digital literacy.
- Clear, factual communication of education policies and curriculum changes, particularly around sexuality education, is another key area of activity to counter misrepresentation.
- Engaging with parents and communities in consultative development of policies and curricula can help allay concerns, and support contextually appropriate content, keeping in mind these processes may also provide entry points for gender-restrictive actors to mobilise and influence curriculum content.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best available knowledge and resources are harnessed to have a growing impact on discriminatory gender norms.

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