

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**WHOSE HANDS ON
OUR EDUCATION?**

**IDENTIFYING AND COUNTERING
GENDER-RESTRICTIVE BACKLASH**

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Introduction

This Executive Summary outlines the findings of an ALIGN report that reviews literature focusing on the activities of gender-restrictive actors and organisations in education who aim to promote a narrow vision of gender relations, based on patriarchal social norms and a binary view of gender. The report examines the impact on formal education based on evidence from contexts outside North America and Western Europe. The research is based on a review of grey and academic literature. It outlines illustrative examples of the main approaches and tactics being used by gender-restrictive actors based on the available literature in relation to education.

Its main contributions are to bring a focus to gender-restrictive activity in education. Gender-restrictive actors target education because of its role in promoting national identity, reinforcing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and because of its potential to influence norms and values. The report identifies key areas of focus in education, distinguishing issues of access, curriculum and school practices, and outlines the tactics and strategies used in each of these areas. It integrates insights from a wide set of contexts to draw attention to the scope of global activity and highlights emerging evidence on effective strategies for resisting gender-restrictive action in education.

Conceptualising organised gender-restrictive activities in education

The dynamics that have fuelled the rise of these different groups of gender-restrictive actors differ regionally but share some common elements. Contemporary social and political dynamics have facilitated the rise of these actors. These include economic decline and the rise of populism and authoritarianism, conservative political forces, and the influence of religious organisations. Gender-restrictive actors consider the rise of feminism, liberal social values, 'Western influence', gender and sexual diversity, and sexual freedoms as key threats.

Actors opposed to these changes have increasingly funnelled resources into a transnational funding ecosystem that supports gender-restrictive political movements. The scale of funding dedicated to promoting their agendas has helped spur growth and finance their campaigns and networks in the Global South. This includes money spent by Christian and right-wing funders through transnational networks and organisations, as well as Islamist groups, conservative governments and militant groups, all of which have targeted education to promote their political views.

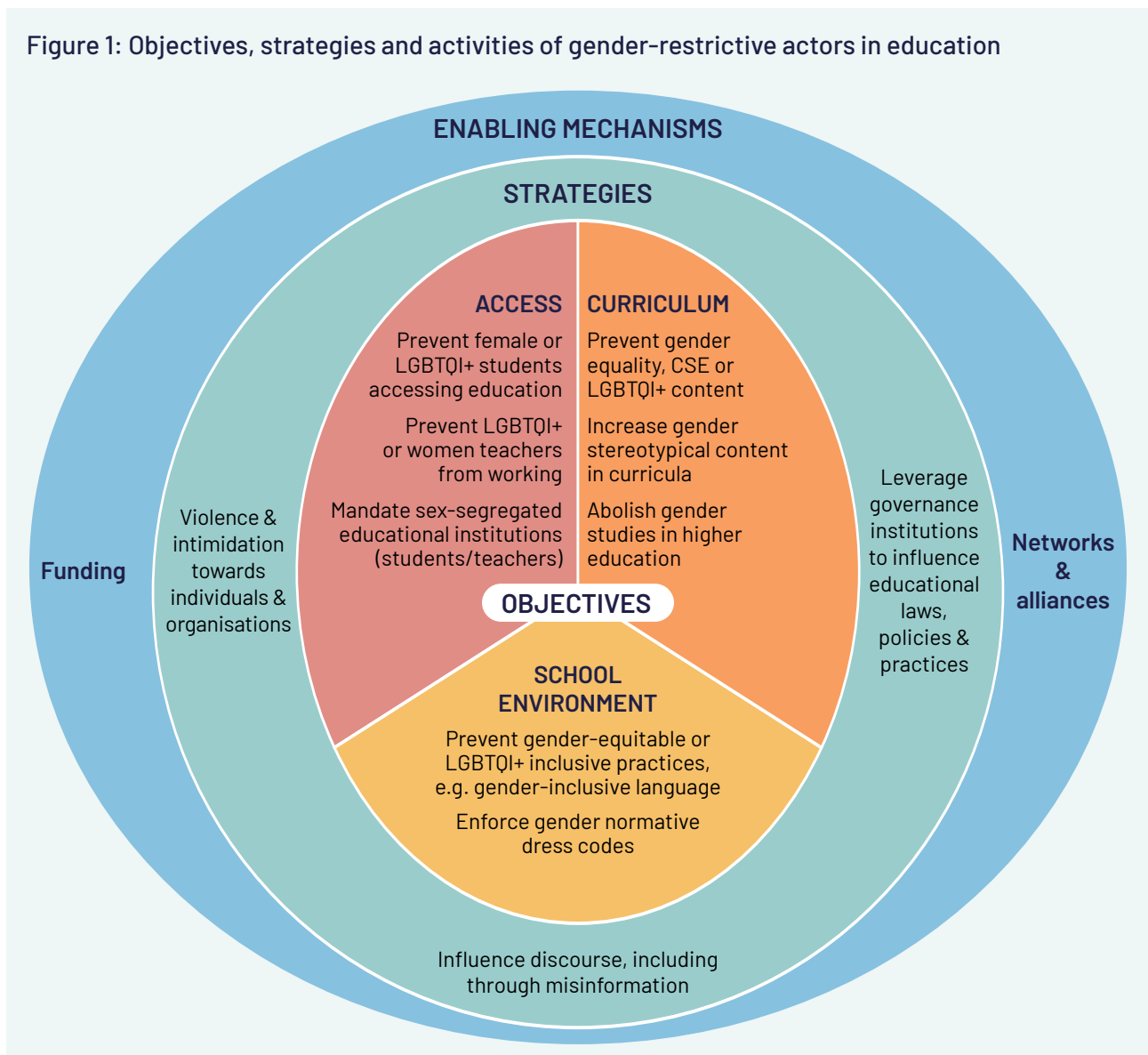
The key aim of gender-restrictive actors is to generate a long-term cultural shift to (re-)establish hetero-patriarchal social norms. This long-term vision gives an overarching sense of purpose and helps these groups stay resilient in the face of short-term defeats. In pursuit of this vision, they engage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

The key changes that gender-restrictive actors seek in formal education are in relation to three areas of education policy and practice:

- **Access:** who can attend school or higher education, and who can teach
- **Curriculum:** what students learn, e.g. curricular content and sexuality education
- **School practices:** such as sports participation, and policies around LGBTQI+ inclusion.

The enabling mechanisms they use are primarily substantial funding flows and strong networks and alliances that facilitate transnational to local reach. One key strategy is leveraging governance institutions to influence educational laws and policies. Another strategy is influencing discourse, including through misinformation; this involves mobilising a discourse of child protection, anti-colonialism, misinformation or conspiracy theories, and victimhood. Third, some groups that hold state power or that engage in militancy use violence and intimidation to advance their agenda.

Figure 1: Objectives, strategies and activities of gender-restrictive actors in education



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. Gender norms have been weaponised for political purposes to influence policies and restrict women's and girls' access to education. The Taliban in Afghanistan, and militant anti-rights groups that target schoolgirls in Nigeria, Uganda and other contexts, have used scripture to justify their attacks. Although gender-restrictive actors rarely directly seek to prevent LGBTQI+ students from accessing education, their homophobic and transphobic discourse contributes to an environment in which school authorities can act with impunity against LGBTQI+ students to deny them access. 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).

Some gender-restrictive actors intimidate teachers or exclude women from teaching to enforce religiously justified sex segregation, as in Iran. Teachers perceived to be advocates of gender equality or LGBTQI+ rights, or who are (or are perceived to be) LGBTQI+, have been targeted by actors to instil fear or prohibit them from teaching, as in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. Gender-restrictive actors have also mobilised against efforts to prevent discrimination against LGBTQI+ students and teachers.

Curriculum: what students learn

Political power is used to consolidate or expand gender biases into teaching and learning materials or oppose reforms to promote more gender-equitable content, and/or to infuse them with greater religious content or misogynist stereotypes. Religious institutions and groups, sometimes working with civil society organisations (CSOs), have resisted efforts to remove gender biases from schoolbooks or stalled gender-inclusive content.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a major target of gender-restrictive actors, who work in coalitions with parent-led advocacy groups, state actors or religious leaders to prevent teaching children about sexuality, reproductive health or gender diversity. Opposition to CSE is likely to have more traction in contexts where the political environment is unsympathetic to gender equality. Political leaders often find the issue of CSE useful to build support. In Brazil, for example, Bolsonaro supporters gained attention by lobbying against CSE under the movement, *Escola sin Partido* (School Without [Political] Party). *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (Don't Mess With My Kids) 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.

Parental groups sometimes work in alliance with governments and political parties to restrict LGBTQI+ content from schools. For example, the Parents' Committee of Ukraine (Roditel'skiy Komitet Ukrainy), a key anti-LGBTQI+ rights group in Ukraine established in 2011, worked closely with the Orthodox Church to argue that children are valuable for building a state independent from Western influences and, therefore, need protection from homosexuality.

Gender-restrictive actors have also targeted gender and cultural studies in universities. One strategy is to reduce funding for programmes in which debates over gender issues can be studied. A second strategy is to generate public protests against specific scholars, such as opposition to the gender scholar Judith Butler in Brazil or feminist scholars in Arab countries.



Credit: Illustration by Reya Ahmed for ALIGN, 2024

Gendered school practices: protest change

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.

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. The hostility of many conservative politicians and commentators to gender-neutral language often reflects opposition to feminism and/or rejection of gender diversity, though it can also respond to a preference to maintain linguistic traditions, and/or to facilitate young children's literacy and language learning.

Gender-neutral school toilets and changing facilities have become a 'touchpoint' in culture wars. 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 and Colombia, where misinformation campaigns raised fears among the public that single-sex facilities were being banned and homosexuality forced upon children.

School sports have also become the focus of some gender-restrictive actors. This takes the form of restrictions on what sports girls can play or attire considered appropriate when doing so; and what types of sports are appropriate to play, and for whom. Restrictions on girls' participation in sports, as advocated by Islamist groups in Pakistan, limit their freedom to play, while all sports participation is simply banned by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Countering gender-restrictive activities in education

The report presents emerging evidence on strategies for resistance. Five key approaches are:

- **Leveraging the law and human rights frameworks.** 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, the Supreme Court has struck down some state laws that sought to remove sexuality education from the curriculum through banning 'gender ideology'.

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 pregnant students and 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).

- **Engaging in policy advocacy and dialogues.** 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. Such CSOs have developed content, built coalitions of support and achieved government policy breakthroughs in contexts as different as Mexico, Peru, Kenya and Pakistan.
- **Building support for gender-equitable initiatives.** Providing accurate information about proposed policies, showing how they respond to issues of concern amongst different stakeholder groups (such as teenage pregnancy) and engaging over the long term can help build support for more extensive or effective CSE. CSOs have also mobilised with networks of activists to provide education for groups without access.
- **Countering misinformation.** A multi-pronged approach to countering mis- and disinformation is proving useful. Providing direct accurate information, often through digital platforms and non-formal education, as well as advocating for greater regulation of media disinformation are all promising strategies. Nonetheless, pro-gender equality actors' resources and ability to produce positive information is often outstripped by that of gender-restrictive actors for whom mis- and disinformation are key tactics for generating fear and outrage.
- **Supporting public protests.** As groups directly affected by efforts to restrict education, youth activists have vocally advocated for gender equality in education, LGBTQI+ rights and CSE. Student protests against forced dress codes in India, or the women led Bring Back Our Girls movement in Nigeria, have raised public awareness and pushed governments to act.

In addition, two key enabling factors are critical:

- **Political leadership.** 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. For example, in 2017, the Ukrainian education minister prohibited school parental committees linked with Parental Veto movements in other countries in 2017.
- **Broader allyship and funding support.** United Nations agencies and other human rights organisations have denounced violations of human rights, such as violence against girls and LGBTQI+ communities or efforts to undermine CSE in schools. Programmes such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Our Rights, Our Lives, Our Future (O3) programme across 33 African countries have helped keep CSE on the political agenda and contributed to new laws and rulings supporting adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (UNESCO, 2023).

Conclusion

Gender-restrictive actors in education include political parties, religious organisations, militant groups, CSOs, and allied media organisations. All seek to influence education systems and promote highly patriarchal, heteronormative visions of society, sexuality and family life. The geographical diversity of examples underscores the scale and transnational connections, and thus the pervasive challenges for people and organisations seeking to promote gender equality in and through education. These organisations and their networks often leverage political, social and financial capital, through transnational ties and extensive funding flows, to impact national policies. This review distinguishes key strategies: influencing governance institutions at various levels and influencing discourse to shape norms and garner support for campaigns, actions or legislation, along with the use of violence and intimidation in some contexts.

The review also reveals counterstrategies employed by gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights activists in education, however, they do not fully and effectively counter the broad spectrum of tactics employed by gender-restrictive organisations. Resistance strategies currently deployed, such as mobilising human rights legislation and constitutional provisions, policy dialogue and advocacy, coalition-building, protest, and countering disinformation, while useful, rely on high-level political support to be effective. Ways forward to counter the negative resurgence of gender-restrictive actors in education will need global support (through long-term, less restrictive funding, and the implementation of human rights frameworks and values) and national protection (through law and policy, responsible media, and open civic space).

Education systems must mainstream gender-equitable values, encourage critical thinking skills, and engage with parents and communities to develop appropriate curricular content without succumbing to fearmongering. Further research is needed to address evidence gaps with respect to geographic scope and impact, and modes of operation (e.g. in non-formal education, transnational networks, use of school structures and education providers) of gender-restrictive actors. Finally, the report recommends further examination of resistance strategies, such as the protective effect of national legal frameworks, strategic litigation, and consultative processes to secure gender equality and inclusivity in all areas of education.

References

For full references, see [main report](#).

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About ALIGN

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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