

ALIGN REPORT

Unpacking opposition: the contested landscape of life skills-based education in Pakistan



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About Aahung

Established in 1995, Aahung is a Karachi-based NGO working to strengthen access to quality sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services across Pakistan. The organization envisions a society where individuals can make informed decisions about their bodies, health, and relationships within safe and supportive environments. Through partnerships, education, and dialogue, Aahung supports the creation of spaces where people feel confident in their bodies, adopt healthy practices, and are able to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. Its work is rooted in cultural context and community realities, and has helped bring greater visibility to SRH across medical and educational institutions, as well as within civic and government systems.



Aahung is committed to challenging gender inequality and supporting young people in navigating their lives with clarity and confidence. Through the introduction of Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE) in a network of partner schools, Aahung supports children and adolescents in understanding their bodies, questioning restrictive gender norms, and building the knowledge needed to make informed choices. Teachers are supported to deliver this content effectively, while parents are engaged to foster open communication and reinforce safe, affirming environments for young people.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CSE	Comprehensive sexuality education
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
JI	Jamaat-e-Islami
KII	Key informant interview
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (the plus sign represents people who may identify their gender or sexuality using other terms)
LSBE	Life skills-based education
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PITE	Provincial Institute of Teacher Education
Rahnuma FPAP	Rahnuma Family Planning Association of Pakistan
SELD	Sindh Education and Literacy Department
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
SNC	Single National Curriculum
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Executive summary

Life skills-based education (LSBE), a form of comprehensive sexuality education adapted for Pakistan, has gained ground in education policy and practice. While Sindh is the only province to formally integrate LSBE into the secondary school curriculum, non-governmental organisations have expanded its reach nationwide through private and public schools, and significant outreach with out-of-school children and adolescents. Yet, LSBE remains contested, not through outright rejection but through efforts to reshape, restrict or dilute its content. This report examines the evolving nature of opposition to LSBE, highlighting how resistance has shifted from blocking its inclusion to controlling its framing and delivery.

Opposition to LSBE in Pakistan is not led by a centralised anti-gender movement, as seen in some other contexts (Martínez et al., 2021; El Perfil, 2022; Ngabaza, 2022). Instead, it is diffuse, rooted in patriarchal norms, religious interpretations and anxieties about shifting social structures. Few actors call for LSBE's removal from educational spaces; instead, they push for content censorship, dilution, religious framing and self-censorship. Certain topics – such as puberty, bodily autonomy and child marriage – are softened or removed to align with patriarchal social norms. Religious framing further repackages LSBE in ways that reinforce, rather than challenge, traditional gender roles. At the same time, self-censorship among educators and policy-makers limits LSBE's impact, as many pre-emptively adjust content to avoid controversy, even when no direct opposition is present.

Despite these constraints, LSBE continues to expand due to strategic advocacy. Positioning LSBE as a child protection initiative has secured its place in education policy, particularly following high-profile child abuse cases. Localised adaptations have reduced resistance, though they have also led to tensions over whether LSBE should reinforce existing norms or challenge them. Advocacy efforts focused on teacher training, parental engagement and policy-maker buy-in have helped build legitimacy. Advocates have to continue to balance pressures to depoliticise LSBE to maintain broad acceptance while pushing for less socially acceptable content to be included.

A key emerging challenge is the gradual dilution of LSBE into a vague life-skills framework that strips away essential content. LSBE is increasingly redefined as a general life skills programme, focusing on communication and personal development while sidelining discussions on gender and sexuality. This reflects broader global trends in education in some contexts, where progressive curricula are reshaped to fit conservative expectations rather than being eliminated outright.

Moving forward, LSBE advocacy must account for content protection and meaningful implementation alongside policy inclusion. Establishing minimum content and delivery standards will be critical to ensuring that LSBE retains its sexual and reproductive health and rights components rather than being reduced to generic well-being education. Expanding beyond the child protection lens – which, while useful, has constrained LSBE's ability to address bodily autonomy and gender-based power structures – is equally important. Securing long-term, flexible funding is necessary to prevent advocacy from being dictated by short-term donor priorities that often reinforce political constraints.

The way forward is to safeguard LSBE's place in education while ensuring it remains a tool for equipping young people to make informed, autonomous decisions. This includes challenging entrenched gender norms and dismantling stigma around sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Key findings

1. LSBE has expanded in Pakistan, but resistance has shifted from outright opposition to control over its framing and delivery. While Sindh remains the only province to formally integrate LSBE into the secondary school curriculum, NGOs have extended its reach nationwide. However, opposition has evolved – not through rejection, but by impeding implementation.
2. Opposition to LSBE is not centrally coordinated but embedded in broader anxieties about shifting social and gender norms. Unlike contexts where anti-gender movements lead resistance, opposition in Pakistan is diffuse, rooted in patriarchal norms and religious interpretations. Few actors call for LSBE’s removal; instead, they seek to modify its content to fit conservative expectations.
3. LSBE is at risk of being diluted into a generic life skills framework. As LSBE gains wider acceptance, its core SRHR content is increasingly being sidelined in favour of general communication and personal development skills. This reflects a global trend where progressive curricula are reshaped to fit conservative expectations rather than being eliminated outright.
4. Preventing dilution means establishing minimum content and delivery standards to ensure SRHR topics remain central. Expanding beyond the child protection framing is also critical, as this approach has constrained LSBE’s ability to address bodily autonomy and power dynamics. Long-term, flexible funding is needed to sustain advocacy beyond short-term donor priorities.

1 Introduction

This report examines the challenges and strategies involved in implementing life skills-based education (LSBE) in Pakistan, with a focus on how opposition from gender-restrictive actors shapes its trajectory. Gender-restrictive actors are organisations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to organise economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a patriarchal and hierarchical vision of gender (Martínez et al., 2021).

Funded by the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) platform, this research contributes to broader efforts by the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team at ODI Global to explore how anti-gender movements influence global progress on gender equality and justice.¹ While existing literature highlights the barriers posed by gender-restrictive actors, there is limited understanding of how these actors organise and sustain their opposition, particularly in highly politicised environments like Pakistan. Similarly, the ways in which advocacy organisations engage with this resistance – navigating backlash, negotiating framing and advancing reform – remain underexplored. This report addresses these gaps by examining LSBE’s implementation in Pakistan and the sociopolitical landscape of opposition that shapes its uneven acceptance.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) has globally been linked to improved sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes (Mbizvo et al., 2023). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2022 global status report on CSE, countries around the world are at various stages of progression and must cater to the distinct requirements of adolescents and children, including ensuring commitment towards CSE mandated by the law (UNESCO, 2021). More generally, sexuality education has been regarded as a vital component of adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) (Newman and Helzner, 1996).

LSBE in Pakistan is a localised adaptation of CSE, designed to address cultural and religious sensitivities that often accompany discussions of SRHR. Framed as a child protection initiative, LSBE equips young people with practical life skills, covering topics such as puberty, menstrual health and body protection. The global conversation around LSBE gained momentum through the work of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on HIV prevention in education, which underscored the need for integrating these topics into school curricula (UNICEF, 2012). In Pakistan, the Ministry of Education’s 2009 National Education Policy emphasised the importance of equipping students with skills applicable to all aspects of life at both primary and secondary levels. In response, Aahung and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on SRHR strategically adopted LSBE to align with youth and education policies at the federal level, and couched a reproductive health curriculum under this term (Ministry of Education, 2009). Annex 1 provides information on Aahung’s LSBE curriculum.

This strategic reframing of CSE as LSBE has allowed it to gain significant ground, particularly in the province of Sindh, yet resistance remains pervasive. Gender-restrictive actors – including religious leaders, religious political parties and segments of civil society – frequently portray LSBE as incompatible with cultural and religious values, using fear-based narratives to influence public opinion and policy (Achen et al., 2023). As a result, LSBE’s implementation remains uneven, with its acceptance shaped by localised negotiations rather than systemic policy shifts.

¹ Anti-gender movements are transnational, conservative mobilisations that oppose gender equality, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion and CSE. They frame these issues as threats to traditional social structures, using the concept of ‘gender ideology’ to delegitimise feminist and queer activism. Rooted in religious fundamentalism, nationalism and right-wing populism, these movements employ fear-based narratives, misinformation and policy interventions to block progressive reforms and restrict civil rights (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Corrêa et al., 2023; Lambie, 2024; Butler, 2024).

The need for LSBE is underscored by Pakistan's entrenched gender inequalities and the social norms that restrict access to information about health and rights, particularly for youth. While nearly 22% of the population is between the age of 10 and 22, many adolescents and young people face systemic barriers to any education about their bodies and rights, driven by sociocultural resistance (Svanemyr et al., 2015). This is compounded by gendered barriers to education and well-being.

Pakistan ranks 145 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024, reflecting deep disparities in education, economic opportunities and political participation (World Economic Forum, 2024). Approximately 2 million more girls than boys are out of school, and only 13% of girls advance to grade 9 (HRW, 2018). Early and forced marriages remain pervasive, with 29% of women married before the age of 18 (National Institute of Population Studies, 2019).

The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2017–2018) reveals that 56% of women who experience violence never seek help, highlighting deep-rooted societal barriers to accessing support services. Additionally, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Pakistan (2022) reports that Pakistan's fertility rate remains alarmingly high at 3.6, exceeding the global average by 157%. This challenge is compounded by the country's low contraceptive prevalence rate of 34% – the lowest among South Asian nations (Qureshi and Bari, 2024). Sahil, an organization working on child protection, reported that an average of 12 children experienced sexual abuse every day between January and June 2023 (Sahil, 2023). Meanwhile Khan et. al. (2023) in a qualitative study with parents in Islamabad capital territory found that while most parents in the study were aware on the common forms of child sexual abuse, they lacked knowledge on manipulative forms of sexual abuse and strategies to communicate to their children about preventing it, calling for implementation of public-focused initiatives and community-based programs for preventing CSA in Pakistan. These vulnerabilities are further intensified by limited access to SRH education and self-development opportunities for youth, where gaps in knowledge have profound implications for public health and population growth (Shaikh and Rahim, 2006).

Despite these pressing needs, SRHR topics remain unacceptable in public discourse. Studies reveal a pervasive fear among adolescents when discussing sexual matters, driven by societal stigma and a lack of safe spaces for dialogue (Talpur and Khowaja, 2012). This silence exacerbates misconceptions, including among boys and young men, who are left to navigate puberty and reproductive health with little to no guidance (Khan, 2014). Adolescent girls, in particular, face systemic neglect, with inadequate education about puberty, menstruation and their rights (Khan, 2014). LSBE aims to fill this gap, equipping young people with essential knowledge and skills while fostering a supportive environment to challenge harmful norms, particularly in schools.

1.1 Aahung's role in advancing LSBE

Aahung, a Karachi-based NGO established in 1995, has played a central role in advancing LSBE in Pakistan. Recognising the contentious nature of SRHR in the country, Aahung developed a nuanced advocacy approach, engaging with stakeholders at multiple levels while adapting its curriculum to navigate cultural sensitivities. Piloted in the city of Karachi in 2005 and expanded to six districts in the Sindh province by 2009, its LSBE programme focuses on essential topics such as body protection, menstrual health and decision-making (Jahangir and Mankani, 2016). Over the years, Aahung has engaged with various stakeholders, including religious scholars, to address contentious issues and modified curriculum language to mitigate opposition. For instance, discussions around contraception have been reframed to focus on 'unsafe sexual practices' rather than explicitly referencing marital or nonmarital contexts (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018).

Aahung's achievements include the 2018 integration of LSBE into Sindh's secondary school curriculum. This milestone was facilitated by partnerships with provincial education departments,

teacher training programmes and advocacy campaigns highlighting the importance of child protection. Prior to this, Aahung successfully integrated SRH content into medical school curricula, ensuring that future healthcare professionals were equipped with essential knowledge on these issues. From the outset, Aahung's strategic approach has been to strengthen existing systems by focusing on capacity-building and improving curricular content and teaching methodologies within both school-based and medical education institutions. By working with local and global organisations, Aahung has established itself as a model for navigating the complexities of CSE implementation in conservative contexts.

However, while Aahung's strategies have been effective, it remains critical to understand how opposition to LSBE functions. As this research finds, resistance to LSBE does not result mainly from highly coordinated activities of oppositional actors. Rather, it draws strength from deeply rooted social norms that shape policy decisions, school environments and parental attitudes. By further examining how this opposition manifests and adapts over time, LSBE advocates can refine their strategies, anticipate resistance and expand LSBE's reach more effectively.

1.2 Scope of the report

Drawing on qualitative research conducted between September and December 2024, this report examines what opposition to LSBE looks like in Pakistan, how gender-restrictive actors pose challenges to LSBE integration and implementation in education systems, and how some of these challenges have been mitigated. By documenting these dynamics, this report contributes to the broader effort to understand how opposition to LSBE operates in Pakistan and how progressive reforms can continue to advance. It offers insights for advocacy organisations, policy-makers and practitioners striving to integrate inclusive, rights-based education into curricula while navigating the complex realities of sociopolitical resistance. It also suggests ways forward for expanding LSBE's implementation.

2 Methods

2.1 Study design

This research employed a qualitative approach to examine how LSBE is contested in Pakistan and the strategies employed to navigate resistance. Initially, it was designed to include two case studies of schools that had partnered with Aahung for LSBE implementation. The rationale for this design was to provide contrasting perspectives: one school where LSBE had been successfully integrated, and another where it had been discontinued due to opposition from key stakeholders. The comparative nature of these case studies aimed to offer insights into the dynamics of acceptance and resistance, as well as the factors that influenced these outcomes.²

2 One of the selected case study schools had successfully integrated Aahung's LSBE curriculum, highlighting key strategies that facilitated acceptance, such as engagement with school management, teachers and parents. The second school, however, discontinued LSBE after an initial period of training and implementation, citing resistance to specific content, such as discussions of puberty. These contrasting experiences were initially intended to illuminate barriers and opportunities in LSBE implementation.

The initial research design aimed to explore these contrasting case studies; however, one of the schools opted to withdraw from the study, citing discomfort with participation, necessitating an adaptation of the research approach. This shift led to a broader examination of gender-restrictive actors across multiple contexts. While this change meant losing the direct comparative element of case studies, it allowed for a deeper understanding of how opposition operates in the LSBE landscape, particularly in a province like Sindh, where LSBE has a stronger foothold. This adaptation provided a broader view of LSBE's contested space, shedding light on how gender-restrictive actors mobilise resistance and how proponents navigate these challenges across different contexts.

2.2 Research questions

The study sought to explore opposition to LSBE and strategies used by its detractors to mobilise against LSBE inclusion in mainstream education. The following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. Who are the proponents and detractors of LSBE?
2. What are the key areas of contention in LSBE content?
3. What motivates changes in attitudes toward LSBE, both positive and negative?
4. How does support for LSBE vary depending on its content and presentation?
5. What role do organised gender-restrictive actors play in shaping policies and attitudes toward LSBE?
6. What lessons can be drawn to inform strategies for shifting stakeholder positions in favour of LSBE?

2.3 Stakeholder categories and participant overview

To address these research questions, stakeholders were categorised into five broad groups: Sindh Education and Literacy Department (SELD) officials; educators and parents involved in LSBE implementation in Aahung's partner school; gender-restrictive actors; representatives of gender-inclusive NGOs; and Aahung trainers. These categories reflected both supporters and detractors of LSBE, providing a comprehensive view of the forces shaping its implementation.

Gender-restrictive actors – including educationists, teachers, school management, private schools' associations, teachers' associations, representatives of religious groups, and representatives of religious and conservative political parties – were categorised as such because the participants selected from these groups had explicitly voiced some opposition to LSBE during the research. While these stakeholder groups as a whole are not monolithically opposed, and many individuals within them support LSBE in various capacities, the research engaged specifically with those who resisted LSBE's implementation, due to ideological, religious or pedagogical concerns.

In total, 70 participants were engaged through 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 18 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted between September and December 2024. SELD officials offered insights into policy-level challenges and opportunities, while educators and parents shared their experiences with LSBE. Gender-restrictive actors articulated their concerns and objections. At the same time, NGO representatives and Aahung trainers provided a contrasting perspective, highlighting strategies to address resistance and advocate for LSBE.

Table 1 provides an overview of participants by category, profession and data collection method.

Table 1: Overview of research participants

Category	Type of stakeholder	Data collection method	No. of participants	Identifiers
SELD and government teacher training institutes	Government education officials	Key informant interview	14	KII 1.1, KII 1.2, KII 1.3, KII 1.4, KII 1.5, KII 1.6
Aahung partner school	Teachers	Focus group discussion	5	FGD 1
	Parents	Focus group discussion	5	FGD 2
	Programme manager	Key informant interview	1	KII 2
	Managing trustee	Key informant interview	1	KII 3
Gender-restrictive actors	Private school teachers and management	Key informant interview	9	KIIs 4.1, KII 4.2, KII 4.3, KII 4.4, KII 4.5, KII 4.6, KII 4.7, KII 4.8, KII, 4.9
	Private school associations	Focus group discussion	19	FGD 3.1 and FGD 3.2
	Political party representatives and members of religious groups	Focus group discussion and key informant interview	9	FGD 4.1, FGD 4.2, and KII 5
	Government school teachers' association	Focus group discussion	9	FGD 5
	Provincial government curriculum assessment department	Focus group discussion	6	FGD 6
Gender-inclusive NGOs	NGO staff	Focus group discussion	8	FGD 7
Aahung trainers	LSBE trainers	Key informant interview	1	KII 6
TOTAL			87	Total number of interactions = 28

2.4 Data collection activities

The research used multiple qualitative methods to capture the nuanced dynamics of LSBE implementation and resistance. Semi-structured interviews with key informants provided in-depth insights into individual perspectives, while FGDs facilitated group discussions to identify shared and divergent views. Stakeholder mapping conducted during the initial phase of the study helped identify influential actors and their roles within the LSBE landscape. A review of grey literature – including media reports, policy documents and organisational materials – further contextualised the findings.

2.5 Challenges in data collection

Collecting data from gender-restrictive actors posed significant challenges. Many participants were hesitant to openly express opposition to LSBE, especially in Sindh, where the programme is framed as a child protection initiative and is officially endorsed by the education department. This made direct resistance socially and politically sensitive, as outright rejection of LSBE could be seen as controversial.

Some potential participants declined to engage in the research, likely due to their opposition to LSBE or discomfort in discussing their views in a research setting. Additionally, some groups were hesitant to speak to the research team because of their perception that Aahung was engaged in certain types of rights-based activism which they opposed, such as the Aurat March, a feminist movement in Pakistan (Kamal, 2022). Political party and professional association members were particularly cautious, often requiring assurances of confidentiality before agreeing to participate. The second school, which was originally intended to be part of the case study approach (see Section 2.1) declined to participate because it was opposed to LSBE content and the implementation or integration of such programming in school curricula.

Beyond individual or institutional hesitancy, the research also encountered broader structural challenges in identifying organised opposition to LSBE. While the research team was seeking organised opposition – such as that found in Latin America and other regions where anti-rights groups mobilise against CSE by influencing state institutions (Martinez et al., 2021; El Perfil, 2022; Ngabaza, 2022) – resistance in Pakistan was found to be more diffuse, embedded within various stakeholder groups rather than coordinated through a centralised movement.

To overcome these challenges, the research team employed strategies to build trust, including framing discussions around broader educational concerns and ensuring anonymity for all participants. These efforts facilitated more open dialogue and helped mitigate the reluctance of gender-restrictive actors to engage in discussions about LSBE. Furthermore, the line of questioning was revised to carefully unpack oppositional sentiments towards LSBE, even from individuals who claimed to be broadly supportive.

2.6 Data analysis

Interviews and FGDs were transcribed and translated into English, ensuring consistency and accuracy. A coding framework, developed from the research questions and emergent themes, guided the analysis. The data were thematically analysed using Atlas.ti software, allowing for a systematic exploration of resistance dynamics, stakeholder engagement and advocacy strategies.

2.7 Ethical considerations

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, with informed consent (signed by a witness or verbally recorded) obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of their anonymity, and identifying information was anonymised to protect privacy. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by IRD Global in Pakistan and ODI Global's ethics review committee, ensuring compliance with international guidelines.

Through the analysis of data collected from a diverse range of stakeholders, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical forces shaping LSBE in Pakistan. The following section contextualises LSBE's development, exploring the challenges it faces and the progress made so far in integrating it into mainstream education.

3 LSBE in Pakistan: progress and resistance

To understand LSBE's contested space in Pakistan, it is essential to examine its intersection with entrenched gender norms, historical curriculum reforms and broader political contentions. This section contextualises LSBE within Pakistan's sociopolitical landscape, highlighting how these dynamics shape both opposition and opportunities for progress.

In Pakistan, CSE is often framed as LSBE to navigate cultural and religious sensitivities. Education is a provincial mandate in Pakistan, which means no national law or policy enables LSBE to be incorporated into the education system via curricula or school practices. To date, Sindh is the only province of Pakistan which has adopted LSBE at the state level, by integrating it into the curriculum and associated textbooks for grades 6–8. Other provinces and territories do not have any legislation or policies incorporating LSBE into mainstream education, although the Balochistan province now has an agreement with Aahung to integrate LSBE in its curricula, but the process is slow and ongoing. While LSBE has not been integrated in government schools in regions other than Sindh, many private educational institutions across the country have adopted LSBE and integrated it into their curricula, largely due to the efforts of NGOs, particularly Aahung.

Aahung remains the only organisation implementing LSBE in schools in a way that aligns with the core principles of CSE. However, other organisations have been involved in different aspects of LSBE and broader SRHR education. Historically, organisations such as Rutgers and the World Population Foundation, UNFPA, UNICEF, Rahnuma Family Planning Association of Pakistan (Rahnuma FPAP), Oxfam, Plan International Pakistan and Rozan played significant roles in LSBE efforts (Rutgers, 2020; World Population Foundation, 2011; Oxfam Novib, 2014; UNICEF, 2021; Rahnuma FPAP, 2023; UNFPA Pakistan, 2024). Rahnuma FPAP and UNFPA assembled a national task force on CSE, which included Aahung as a member. This task force served as a key platform for coordinating efforts among organisations, but by 2016, it had effectively disbanded. Rather than a formal dissolution, it fell apart as many of the participating organisations lost their registration in Pakistan due to increasing government restrictions on international NGOs. This crackdown severely impacted funding and operational capacities, making sustained collaboration impossible.

Despite these challenges, some organisations continue to engage in LSBE in Pakistan, though efforts are largely happening in pockets rather than in a systematic or large-scale manner. UNFPA

and Rahnuma FPAP continue to work on LSBE, along with local organisations such as Dastak (which focuses on religious seminaries) and Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (2022). Other organisations, including The Awakening (2023) and Grow Up, have also begun working on various forms of curricular change. These efforts signal a growing recognition of LSBE's importance in education, even as implementation remains fragmented and localised.

Beyond LSBE, several organisations are engaged in broader SRHR awareness at the community level rather than within formal school settings. These include the Legal Aid Society, HANDS, the Rural Support Programmes Network and Baithak, among others (Legal Aid Society, 2024; HANDS, 2024). While their work contributes to SRHR education, it is distinct from in-school LSBE programming, which continues to be primarily led by Aahung.

3.1 Challenges to LSBE

When mapping stakeholders for this research, it became increasingly clear that opposition to LSBE in Pakistan is not driven by a coordinated anti-gender movement but rather stems from deeply embedded cultural norms and traditional beliefs about gender roles, morality and sexuality. Gender-restrictive actors are present across various stakeholder groups and periodically mobilise to resist broader gender equality discourses. While their opposition is not always systematic, it reflects anxieties about changes that challenge established social structures. Some actors frame LSBE as promoting 'foreign' or 'western' values that undermine traditional ways of life. Similar concerns have emerged globally, such as in South Africa and Ghana, where opposition to CSE is driven by religio-political actors who frame it as a foreign imposition that threatens traditional gender norms and the heterosexual family structure (Ubisi, 2020; Fuller, 2023).

This phenomenon is not unique to Pakistan; globally, there have been instances where educational initiatives face resistance rooted in cultural or religious belief. For example, in South Africa, conservative Christian activists have resisted the implementation of CSE in the national curriculum as it threatens cultural values embedded within the heterosexual family structure (Ubisi, 2020). Therefore, local religious bodies in South Africa portray CSE as an imposed foreign agenda by the United Nations – their opposition efforts fuelled by politicised homophobia and uplifting Christian nationalism. Similarly, in Ghana where there is a resounding consensus surrounding the need for sex education, religio-political groups contest the integration of CSE within the syllabi, framing the curriculum as incompatible with local traditional gender norms, threatening the 'natural' heterosexual family structure (Fuller, 2023).

A seasoned LSBE advocate explained, 'There isn't any organised mafia behind it, but culture and religion prevail against it' (KII 3, Karachi, 18 December 2024). This echoes the views of other organisations advocating for LSBE and highlights how opposition is shaped more by societal norms than by deliberate, coordinated efforts.

Although opposition actors in Pakistan do not operate as an organised coalition, they frequently influence educational policies and resist initiatives they perceive as threatening. Some teachers and curriculum reviewers, for instance, argue LSBE should be incorporated into Islamic studies and science rather than as a standalone subject, fearing it introduces concepts perceived as inappropriate or disruptive. A curriculum reviewer in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province noted:

If a teacher teaches LSBE in KP, the community would think that they are imposing harmful ideas on children. KP is sensitive to these topics.

FGD 6, Abbottabad, 4 December 2024

This sensitivity stems from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and the influence of Pashtunwali, an unwritten code of conduct that reinforces gender segregation and honour-based restrictions (Khan et al., 2022). Concerns about family honour and morality often lead to parental resistance toward LSBE, particularly for girls, as education is sometimes perceived as a threat to traditional values (Khan et al., 2022).

Globally, anti-gender movements actively campaign against educational reforms that challenge patriarchal structures, often in the name of preserving the 'natural family' (Martínez et al., 2021). This research has found that oppositional actors in the Pakistani context share the fears advanced by international movements that LSBE threatens traditional gender norms. The belief that LSBE is tied to foreign agendas further exacerbates opposition.

Such sentiments repeatedly emerged in participant interactions. Representatives from private schools' associations, religious political parties and SELD associated gender equality components of LSBE with the Aurat March, a feminist movement in Pakistan, noting that they are against this movement and the way it conceptualises and promotes ideas about gender.³ One school owner suggested that Aahung trainers were part of feminist groups who organise the Aurat March, citing his opposition to such causes:

Your message is the same as of the women that march [on the streets] raising candle lights and inappropriate slogans.

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

In a discussion with representatives from a religious political party, LSBE was similarly framed as fostering an individualistic, rights-based approach at odds with Islamic values: 'We don't want to make such a society which is free of parental control, where a girl stands up and demands her rights' (FGD 4.1, Karachi, 19 November 2024). This conflation of LSBE with broader feminist and human rights discourses reinforces fears that it could erode traditional social hierarchies through the imposition of western values.

Resistance to LSBE intersects with broader struggles over gender equality in Pakistan, including debates around the minimum age of marriage, marital rights and family planning. An NGO representative emphasised the religious sensitivities surrounding family planning:

The topic of family planning and contraception is sensitive, and you can't openly discuss it, especially considering age-appropriateness. Family planning is also linked to religion, and some people believe that it goes against their faith.

FGD 6, Islamabad, 5 December 2024

Similar arguments are used to oppose discussions on gender equality in LSBE, with many participants asserting that religious teachings already provide sufficient guidance on gender roles and relationships. One notable instance occurred in 2004 during the tenure of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal coalition,

³ The Aurat March is an annual feminist demonstration held across various cities in Pakistan, usually on 8 March, International Women's Day. Its organisers advocate for gender equality, bodily autonomy and women's rights. The march, known for its bold slogans such as *mera jism, meri marzi* ('my body, my choice'), has sparked intense debate. Supporters see it as a platform for marginalised voices, while opponents – including conservative religious and political groups – accuse it of promoting western, secular values and disrupting traditional social structures. The march has faced significant backlash, including misinformation campaigns, threats and violent counter-protests (Kelso, 2024).

which was composed of religious political parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The Minister for Religious Affairs in KP province publicly burned condom advertisements and CDs as part of an anti-obscenity campaign. Additionally, JI women's leaders demanded a complete ban on family planning advertisements, arguing that such content promoted 'sexual waywardness' (Farooq, 2023).

Religious political parties play a crucial role in reinforcing such narratives.⁴ Many of these parties challenge educational policies that promote gender-sensitive curricula. A government school teacher echoed such perspectives:

In western culture, it is true that children will call the police if parents hit them and say that this [not to be hit] is our right, but in our religion, these things are very clear [and] to what extent the parents have a right over children because it is a part of our upbringing.

KII 1, Karachi, 22 November 2024

This framing positions LSBE not just as an educational reform but as part of a broader ideological struggle against western influence.

An NGO representative noted that many people dismiss topics like transgender rights and gender equality as issues belonging to western societies, irrelevant to Pakistan:

Ownership issues are also clear. When people don't understand that this is an issue for our Pakistan, our culture, or our province, they don't move forward. For instance, transgender issues. I recall that in 2016, we consulted with doctors, and they said this isn't our issue; it's a western agenda.

FGD 6, Islamabad, 5 December 2024

This notion of foreign influence is frequently used to delegitimise advocacy efforts, positioning LSBE as an external threat rather than a locally relevant need.

Similarly, gender-based violence (GBV) is frequently dismissed as a western construct that contradicts Islamic principles. A Sindh government official remarked:

Look, as a Muslim, it is said in our religion that a husband has a slightly higher position than a wife. In our religion, western culture is being brought where husband and wife are equal. Look, gender-based violence is western culture. It is not in our religion... Because I am married, so I can understand that it is being imported by people who say that their body is their choice.

KII 1, Karachi, 22 November 2024

This belief reflects how GBV is often rationalised or justified using religious and cultural arguments, making it harder to address through legal and policy measures.

⁴ Religious political parties in Pakistan, such as JI, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, have been active since the 1950s. While these parties have historically held limited seats in the National Assembly, their influence extends far beyond electoral politics. Through mass mobilisation, street protests and alliances with mainstream political actors, they have played a significant role in shaping national discourse, particularly on issues related to education, gender and morality (Kumar, 2001).

Concerns about LSBE disrupting social norms are also closely tied to anxieties about sexuality and gender roles. Discussions around puberty, child marriage and decision-making are often seen as destabilising traditional hierarchies. A school owner articulated this fear:

You should tell your team that they are not just provoking culture now, but they are also tarnishing the respect for *hifz-e-maratib* [violating the status quo, which includes respect for elders].

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

These concerns illustrate how LSBE is perceived as challenging not just individual behaviours but the broader moral and cultural framework that underpins Pakistani society.

The opposition to LSBE is reinforced by historical and structural factors within Pakistan's education system. The country's education policies are deeply influenced by religious and cultural considerations, making CSE a contentious topic (Shaikh and Ochani, 2018). Gender-restrictive actors actively shape education policy to reflect their ideological perspectives, using fear-based narratives, misinformation and institutional alliances to block reforms that threaten patriarchal structures (Martínez et al., 2021). The roots of government support for gender-restrictive policies lie in the political landscape, particularly the state's commitment to ensure that laws and policies would adhere to Islamic doctrine.

This commitment was driven by the influence of religious political parties and accelerated during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988). His Islamisation policies institutionalised patriarchal norms, embedding religious conservatism into education, law and governance. The curriculum reforms of 1979 embedded into content messages that women's roles were firmly confined to the domestic sphere, while martyrdom in the context of holy wars was idealised and negative stereotypes about non-Muslim communities were perpetuated (Saigol, 2005; Bradley and Saigol, 2012). Textbooks depicted women as custodians of tradition, culture and morality, portraying them as a defence against the perceived immorality of western cultural influences (Saigol, 2003, 2005). This legacy persists today, with gender-restrictive actors leveraging these structural foundations to resist LSBE and related reforms.

In 2013, the KP provincial government, led by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in coalition with JI, announced plans to restore content promoting jihad in school textbooks, sparking concerns about the radicalisation of young people (Bezhan, 2013). Similarly, in 2011, Aahung, in partnership with another organisation, was working to provide LSBE in schools across Punjab and Sindh through a donor-funded project. However, a right-wing newspaper reporter, posing as an Aahung staff member, misrepresented the programme, claiming it promoted sexual intercourse and 'immoral practices' among young people. This misinformation spread across the media and led to backlash from conservative groups like JI, who accused the programme of spreading 'vulgarity' and undermining Islamic values (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2016). JI also opposed legal protections for transgender individuals (The Express Tribune, 2022). In 2019, under Imran Khan's administration, Pakistan initiated the development of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) as an attempt to standardise education nationwide. However, these curriculum reforms have been widely criticised for further increasing religious content and restricting the portrayal of progressive gender roles (Akhter, 2021).

These education policies shaped an entire generation, reinforcing conservative gender norms through state-mandated curricula. However, the expansion of private education in the 1990s and early 2000s created an alternate space where curricular content was not always aligned with state narratives (Institute of Social and Policy Sciences, 2010). Private schools – especially those catering to elite or internationally affiliated institutions – have greater flexibility in what they teach, sometimes

incorporating globalised curricula that include reproductive health education and discussions on gender equality more explicitly than local curricula (Tunio, 2022). This divergence in educational exposure led to growing tensions between conservative stakeholders who sought to maintain traditional gender norms and those advocating for more progressive education.

These tensions became highly visible in 2009, when a significant controversy erupted over reproductive health education in a private school in Karachi. The school introduced reproductive health education into its science curriculum, intending to educate students about the reproduction process. However, this was met with fierce backlash from parents. The school administration defended the decision, stating, 'The reproduction process is something natural, and children should learn it' (Zahidi, 2012). Despite this rationale, the curriculum sparked intense opposition. A coalition comprising members of the Ministry of Education, media representatives and a 'Parents Action Committee' raided the school, sealing it and confiscating the controversial teaching materials (Muhxin Blog, 2012).

Local newspapers such as *Ummat* also criticised the school, claiming that the curriculum included 'knowledge of the reproduction of animals and birth control, which is highly inappropriate for students this age' (Varda, 2009). A reporter described the content as forcefully teaching fifth-grade girls about human and animal reproduction through text and illustrations, asserting that such information was unnecessary and inappropriate for children at such a young age, and was an attempt to corrupt young minds and was in direct opposition to Pakistan's cultural values (Sagar, 2009). These claims were untrue.

Resistance to LSBE is not confined to isolated incidents like this. In 2011, the Punjab government cancelled a memorandum of understanding that would have integrated LSBE into public school curricula, succumbing to pressure from conservative groups. Parents, rather than advocating for LSBE to protect children from issues like sexual abuse, have occasionally been riled up and joined these opposition efforts, as the 'corrupting' aspects of such education get highlighted in such moments of opposition (Malik, 2018). In provinces like Punjab and KP, the political climate remains particularly resistant to LSBE initiatives, as conservative legislators dominate provincial assemblies. To avoid provoking cultural sensitivities, the approved provincial curricula exclude essential topics such as menstruation and puberty, leaving young people unprepared for critical aspects of their health and development (Shirkat Gah, 2020).

This opposition extends beyond governmental actions. In 2014, Kashif Mirza, President of the All Pakistan Private Schools Federation, vehemently criticised LSBE, stating:

It is a clear violation of the law, constitution, and Islamic values. There is no scope for it in a country like Pakistan, and action should be taken against it according to the law.

Ali, 2014

That same year, the government compelled Lahore Grammar School, an elite private institution, to remove all sex education content from its curriculum (Reuters, 2014). Additionally, a retired schoolteacher filed a petition in the Lahore High Court against an NGO for distributing booklets on 'sex education' in schools in Gujranwala district (The Express Tribune, 2012). Similarly, in 2011 and 2012, conservative media outlets linked to JI accused Rutgers (an international NGO with a focus on SRH) of 'breaking the moral fabric of Pakistan' and corrupting young minds. This led to parliamentary discussions, after which the organisation was forced to halt its work in Punjab and was advised to have its content vetted by religious scholars in Sindh (Venkatraman, 2016).

Resistance to LSBE is not confined to specific incidents but is part of broader, albeit unorganised, opposition to gender-sensitive and sexual and reproductive education in Pakistan. The key actors opposing LSBE are religious political parties (some of which are mentioned earlier in this section), educationists and conservative civil society organisations, such as private schools' associations and teachers' associations. Education department officials, while not openly opposing LSBE, at least in Sindh, often stall its implementation through bureaucratic delays, selective omissions of sensitive topics or refusal to support policy changes. Teachers and school associations express concerns that LSBE undermines family authority and exposes children to inappropriate content. Their rhetoric frequently centres on protecting children's 'innocence' and maintaining cultural values. As this research showed, religious political parties frame LSBE as part of a western agenda that contradicts Islamic teachings, particularly opposing content related to gender equality, child marriage and reproductive rights.

Notably, few stakeholders outrightly reject LSBE; rather, their opposition typically targets specific content, the framing of topics, or the frequency and method of instruction. For example, some accept violence prevention education but oppose discussions on the harms of child and early marriage, fearing it may encourage young people to defy parental authority in marriage decisions (FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024). Others believe puberty education should be restricted to girls who have already experienced menarche (FGD 4, Karachi, 20 November 2024). Additionally, some argue that while violence prevention and puberty education are important, they should not be part of the regular school curriculum. They worry that repeated exposure to these topics could introduce ideas that children would otherwise remain unaware of, potentially accelerating their 'maturity' and increasing the risk of sexual promiscuity (FGD 4, Karachi, 9 December 2024).

This pattern of selective opposition rather than outright rejection reflects the way LSBE has gained legitimacy in Pakistan. LSBE's initial acceptance was largely facilitated by its framing as a child protection initiative – an approach that made it difficult to oppose entirely. Given widespread concerns about child sexual abuse, violence and exploitation, LSBE's role in equipping children with safety skills became an argument that even conservative actors found difficult to refute. High-profile cases, such as the Zainab Ansari case (see Section 3.4) and other incidents of child sexual abuse, heightened public awareness and provided a critical entry point for LSBE discussions (Malik, 2018). These cases underscored the urgent need to equip children with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves. Given widespread concerns about child sexual abuse, violence and exploitation, LSBE's role in equipping children with safety skills became an argument that even conservative actors found difficult to refute. Additionally, LSBE's localisation and adaptation to cultural and religious contexts further cemented its place within education. The combination of these factors means that, rather than rejecting LSBE as a whole, opposition actors focus on shaping its content, framing and delivery to fit within socially acceptable limits. The challenge, therefore, is not just about overcoming rejection but about resisting ongoing efforts to reshape LSBE into something less transformative and more aligned with conservative norms.

3.2 Political contentions influencing opposition to LSBE

LSBE aims to address critical gaps in knowledge and skills among children and adolescents, encouraging shifts in their attitudes and behaviours related to gender and sexuality (see Annex 1 for LSBE content by grade). By including content on issues such as child, early and forced marriages and raising awareness of marital rights, particularly for women and girls, LSBE intersects with broader political and social debates. However, these topics are highly contentious in Pakistan's sociopolitical landscape, making them key targets of resistance from religious and conservative actors and resulting in uneven acceptance and implementation of LSBE.

Among the most controversial components of LSBE is child, early and forced marriages. Religious political parties such as JI and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) often argue that setting a minimum legal age for marriage violates Islamic principles, asserting that marriage becomes permissible once an individual reaches puberty, regardless of age (Ali, 2016). Moreover, the Council of Islamic Ideology has ruled against setting a minimum legal age of marriage (Ghani, 2016).⁵ Federally, and in most provinces, the legal minimum age of marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys, with Sindh being the only province that has legislated an equal minimum age of 18 for both genders (Population Council, 2021). However, this reform exists in isolation and has faced significant opposition from religious leaders who characterise it as un-Islamic and contrary to cultural norms (Ghani, 2016; Wasim, 2019).

Even in Sindh, where legal reforms have been introduced, enforcement of the minimum marriage age remains inconsistent, and child marriage rates continue to be high. A Population Council (2021) report based on data from a multiple indicator cluster survey in Sindh reported a 1.3% increase in girls married under age 15 and a 2.2% increase in girls married before the age of 18 years between 2014 and 2018–2019, demonstrating the limited impact of legislative change without broader efforts to shift societal attitudes (Lawrence and Hensley, 2023). This disconnect between policy and social norms poses a significant challenge for LSBE, as addressing the harms of child marriage directly challenges deeply entrenched beliefs.

Marital rights represent another politically sensitive area of resistance to LSBE. The Nikkah Nama (Muslim Marriage Contract) includes provisions granting women the right to marry of their own free will and to initiate divorce. While these rights are legally recognised, their practical implementation is often obstructed by social and cultural norms that reinforce male authority within family structures. Efforts to raise awareness of these rights through LSBE are therefore framed by oppositional actors, including religious political parties, school owners and management, and parents, as an attack on traditional gender roles and family structures (Maher, 2023). This perception fuels broader opposition, even when LSBE's primary goal is to equip adolescents with essential knowledge and skills.

The opposition LSBE encounters is not necessarily directed at LSBE itself but at the broader political and cultural contentions it takes a position on. Gender-restrictive actors do not mobilise specifically against LSBE as an educational initiative but rather against larger societal changes – such as raising the minimum age of marriage, expanding women's rights, shifting gender dynamics and initiating open discussions about bodies and rights – that LSBE is seen to facilitate. These actors then frame LSBE content as a vehicle for foreign ideologies, positioning certain components of LSBE and the rights-based (as opposed to religious) lens with which they are taught within a larger moral and social battle. Consequently, LSBE's acceptance and implementation are shaped by these broader struggles, which determine how and to what extent it can be integrated into educational systems.

Similarly, discussions about women's rights within marriage and divorce are often met with opposition, with gender-restrictive actors arguing that Islam already provides women with rights and that there is no need to challenge existing legal and social structures. A religious political party representative stated:

Our religion is a very beautiful religion, and the Quran has given women their own rights and men their own rights... Like I said, our religion is the best example, and it has given all rights to women.

FGD 4.1, Karachi, 19 November 2024

⁵ The Council of Islamic Ideology is a constitutional advisory body in Pakistan that reviews existing and proposed laws to assess their compliance with Islamic principles as outlined in the Quran and Sunnah. Established under Article 228 of the Constitution of Pakistan, it provides recommendations to the government and parliament but does not have legislative authority. Its role includes advising on legal and policy matters related to Islam, issuing reports and influencing legislative debates, particularly on matters related to family law, gender and religious affairs.

This framing reinforces the idea that any effort to advocate for legal or social change is unnecessary, as the existing framework is considered divinely ordained and complete.

However, in practice, women's legal rights under Islamic law are frequently undermined, particularly regarding the Nikkah Nama. Opposition to ensuring that women are informed of their legal rights – such as the right to divorce or marital property – has been a long-standing issue. Sections of the Nikkah Nama that grant women these rights are commonly removed, effectively denying them legal protections already provided under the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961. This resistance dates back to the very formulation of the ordinance, when Maulana Ehtisham-ul-Haq Thanvi, a member of the then Commission on Marriage and Family Laws, opposed women's equal right to pronounce divorce, claiming that it was 'incompatible with human nature' (Carroll and Kapoor, 1997).

A senior Aahung trainer recounted an experience with SELD officials:

He said that marriages happen anyway, so what is the need to tell about Nikkah Nama? You want to spoil our children. That what we teach is against Islam because if we talk to girls about the right to divorce, we are giving power to girls to demand their rights.

KII 6, Karachi, 24 December 2024

The controversy over the Nikkah Nama is emblematic of how it is contentious not just for its CSE dimensions but also for the perceived threat it poses by providing girls with information about their legal rights.

3.3 Enabling environment for opposition to LSBE

The opposition to LSBE in Pakistan is not only shaped by gender-restrictive ideologies, but also by institutional barriers, thriving within a broader enabling environment shaped by bureaucratic processes and constraints on civic space. These dynamics intersect to create significant barriers to LSBE's implementation, allowing gender-restrictive actors to exert influence and sustain resistance.

Bureaucratic resistance and slow policy implementation

Bureaucratic inefficiencies and resistance within the education sector significantly hinder LSBE implementation. Bureaucratic inertia refers to the structural tendency of institutions to resist change, often due to deeply embedded administrative norms, risk aversion and the complexity of decision-making within bureaucratic systems (Rahman et al., 2023). This inertia is not always a result of direct opposition but rather a mechanism through which institutions maintain stability and existing power dynamics. Rahman et al. (2023) note that public sector leaders often operate within multiple, competing institutional logics that both constrain and enable their agency. The bureaucratic-development logic, which prioritises adherence to administrative routines and risk aversion, discourages subordinates from taking on additional responsibilities beyond routine tasks. This leads to the suppression of institutional change and the reinforcement of existing norms.

While Sindh has been highlighted as a relative success story for LSBE integration, this success remains largely symbolic due to persistent challenges posed by bureaucratic inertia. An LSBE advocate, reflecting on these systemic issues, noted:

To change any policy, you have to first fight a battle of the mindset, and there are bureaucratic hurdles. It's a tedious process. It's not just that there's opposition, but there will always be problems in wanting to implement something [new].

KII 3, Karachi, 18 December 2024

This highlights how bureaucratic structures often fail to prioritise reform implementation, slowing down progress even when policies are formally approved.

Bureaucratic inertia creates an enabling environment for opposition by allowing inefficiencies and procedural delays to be leveraged as mechanisms to stall LSBE implementation. Opposition is not always explicit but can manifest through slow approvals, selective omissions in training materials or reluctance to engage with LSBE content. Rahman et al. (2023) describe how public officials frequently resist reforms not through outright rejection but by adhering to bureaucratic norms that justify inaction. Education officials may not openly oppose LSBE but often perceive it as contradictory to existing institutional norms, leading to delays and passive non-compliance. An NGO representative described their experience working with the Sindh Education Department curriculum reviewers on gender-related content:

They [curriculum reviewers] would be resistant to integrating LSBE topics into textbooks and say that we do not accept it because [an external organisation] is trying to force their curriculum on us. They were so arrogant.

FGD 7, Islamabad, 5 December 2024

Such perceptions contribute to bureaucratic inertia, where reforms are quietly sidelined rather than directly opposed.

This is evidenced by recent monitoring activities conducted by Aahung, which reveal how bureaucratic resistance manifests in the slow and uneven implementation of LSBE. In the aftermath of the child sexual abuse case of Zainab Ansari (see Section 3.4), the Sindh government agreed to integrate LSBE into its curricula. Aahung then worked with SELD to integrate LSBE into the curriculum for grades 6–8, and in 2018, trained 496 'master trainers' in Sindh as part of its cascade training model.⁶ These master trainers – government school teachers – were expected to train other teachers in their districts, ensuring that every teacher received LSBE training and that implementation remained sustainable. However, monitoring visits conducted in 2025 to various public schools across multiple districts indicate that the trickle-down effect of this model has been limited. While master trainers did conduct further training, this was only done up until 2019, and many teachers who were trained failed to implement the curriculum even during that year (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), citing a lack of follow-up and monitoring by SELD. This aligns with Rahman et al.'s (2023) analysis of bureaucratic inertia, where adherence to administrative routines and risk aversion lead to passive non-compliance rather than outright opposition.

⁶ Aahung uses two models to implement LSBE: a cascade model, where master trainers (teachers/educators) receive intensive 'value clarification and attitudinal transformation' and SRHR training before training other teachers, and a direct teacher-training model, where Aahung staff train teachers within schools to independently deliver LSBE. Aahung itself rarely delivers LSBE directly to students.

Additionally, participants in interviews and FGDs noted that frequent turnover among key decision-makers within the education bureaucracy further contributes to implementation challenges (FGD 7, Islamabad, 5 December 2024; KII 3, Karachi, 18 December 2024). While some high-level officials may be receptive to LSBE during advocacy efforts, they are often transferred before reforms can be meaningfully institutionalised. Those who replace them may not share the same level of commitment or may deprioritise LSBE in favour of other policy concerns. This constant reshuffling of personnel creates a gap between policy approval and sustained implementation, allowing bureaucratic inertia to persist. As a result, even when LSBE is formally endorsed, its integration into school systems remains inconsistent and fragile.

At the same time, bureaucracy is not a monolith. While bureaucratic inertia slows LSBE implementation and enables opposition, there are also actors within the system who work to advance reforms. Rahman et al. (2023) introduce the concept of slipstreaming, where public sector leaders navigate institutional inertia by leveraging existing structures to introduce reform without openly challenging the system. Their study shows how bureaucrats act within institutional constraints, using administrative norms to push reforms forward while maintaining legitimacy within the bureaucracy. These findings demonstrate how bureaucratic inertia is not merely a force of resistance but a dynamic process whereby reformists and traditionalists negotiate change. While the bureaucratic-development logic often discourages taking on new responsibilities, some bureaucrats strategically work within the system to legitimise reforms. In the case of LSBE, this means ensuring approvals for teacher training manuals, albeit with revisions, advocating for the integration of content in textbooks, ensuring that at least some content is cascaded down to students, and finding ways to frame LSBE within existing policy frameworks to avoid controversy (KII 1.6, Jamshoro, 18 November 2024).

Bureaucratic resistance and reform efforts exist simultaneously. The same bureaucratic structures that enable inertia also provide opportunities for reform-minded actors to push for incremental change. Rahman et al. (2023) highlight that the process of institutional change is often slow and requires bureaucrats to frame reforms in ways that align with pre-existing institutional logics. While structural barriers to LSBE implementation persist, the presence of reform champions within the system demonstrates that change is possible, even within restrictive environments. Understanding LSBE implementation in Sindh requires recognising bureaucracy not just as a resistant force but as a contested space where inertia, opposition and reformist agency coexist. The institutional resistance that slows LSBE implementation also creates openings for gender-restrictive actors, who exploit bureaucratic inefficiencies to reinforce the status quo.

Shrinking civic space and state crackdowns

Alongside bureaucratic resistance, civic space in Pakistan has been shrinking, further emboldening gender-restrictive actors. Since 2018, the state has intensified its crackdown on both local and international NGOs, particularly those perceived to challenge traditional social norms or promote 'foreign' agendas. As part of this campaign, 18 NGOs were ordered to cease operations, with the government alleging that foreign funding was being used to propagate anti-state activities (Janjua, 2021). This included organisations working on CSE/LSBE, such as Rutgers and Plan International (Asad and Khattak, 2018). Organisations like Aahung, which advocate for LSBE, have faced heightened scrutiny, with their work being labelled as promoting 'western values' or 'immoral content'. While the term 'gender ideology' is not commonly used in Pakistan, opposition to LSBE operates through similar narratives of foreign influence and moral corruption that are central to anti-gender rhetoric in other regions (Lazarus, 2019; McEwen, 2021). Resistance to LSBE is framed as a rejection of external agendas that seek to undermine cultural and religious values, reinforcing a moral panic around education reform rather than explicitly mobilising against 'gender ideology' as seen elsewhere.

These restrictions create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, limiting the ability of LSBE proponents to operate effectively. Shah (2016) notes that constraints on NGOs negatively impact key social indicators, including education, by reducing access to independent advocacy. Furthermore, these restrictions provide indirect support to gender-restrictive actors, who capitalise on increased state surveillance to delegitimise LSBE as a foreign-backed initiative.

A particularly stark example of how this climate of fear manifests is the near-mob violence faced by a school for including reproductive health content in its science curriculum (discussed in Section 3.1). While this incident was not directly linked to LSBE, it illustrates the volatile environment in which educational reforms are introduced. Such instances serve as cautionary tales, discouraging educators and policy-makers from supporting initiatives that could provoke backlash.

Beyond formal restrictions on LSBE, informal social pressures also deter educators from engaging with LSBE training and implementation. Teachers who participate in LSBE training programmes frequently face ridicule from their colleagues, discouraging others from engaging. One teacher recounted:

There were four teachers nominated [for the training], and the other teachers were teasing them a lot that they are going for this certain type of education. I used to get a lot of negative feedback and messages that a certain person is getting teased a lot for attending this training.

FGD 5, Karachi, 20 November 2024

This kind of peer pressure not only discourages individual participation but also reinforces a school-wide culture of avoidance.

Educators also fear that being associated with LSBE could provoke negative attention, particularly in a sociopolitical climate where gender and sexuality education is seen as controversial. A participant from a private schools' association described the broader atmosphere of intolerance:

Our society is so intolerant. You need to be very cautious. In the society we live in, we must work with a sense of balance... It is such a big problem here that someone will harm them in the name of Islam. With people here... honour and justice prevail over everything. If we tell them that a daughter can do this, or a son can do that... it evokes strong sentiments.

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

This broader climate of fear discourages educators from openly advocating for LSBE, leading many to navigate implementation cautiously, ensuring discussions remain within conservative social boundaries.

3.4 Sindh: a success story?

Sindh's integration of LSBE into the school curriculum is often framed as a success, but a closer look reveals a more nuanced reality shaped by broader political and cultural dynamics, underscoring the need to shift parameters of success forward as milestones of progress are achieved. The provincial government's adoption of LSBE for grades 6–8 followed years of sustained advocacy by Aahung and other civil society organisations. A pivotal moment came in 2018, following the Zainab Ansari case, which sparked national outrage over child sexual abuse. Zainab, a seven-year-old girl from Kasur,

Punjab, was abducted, sexually assaulted and murdered – a crime that drew attention to the rising incidence of child sexual abuse in Pakistan (Malik, 2018). Public anger over the case led to widespread protests and demands for systemic reforms, forcing policy-makers to confront the urgent need for child protection measures. Amid this outcry, civil society groups framed LSBE as a preventive approach, equipping children with the knowledge and skills to recognise and report abuse (The Nation, 2018). This framing resonated with policy-makers and the public, providing a rare opportunity to advocate for the integration of LSBE into the school curriculum.

In 2018, the Sindh government began rolling out LSBE through curricular integration and inclusion of content in textbooks and teacher training programmes. While these efforts were broadly welcomed, resistance emerged when certain topics were perceived as culturally sensitive, particularly those addressing puberty, gender and sexuality. The LSBE curriculum introduced in government schools included modules on bodily changes during puberty, menstrual health and dignity, personal hygiene, gender roles, decision-making, and safe and unsafe touch. Additionally, lessons encouraged critical thinking about gender norms, introducing concepts related to self-esteem, consent and respectful interactions across genders. Some teachers objected to content that explicitly named reproductive anatomy, addressed bodily autonomy or encouraged open discussions about menstruation, believing these topics to be too explicit for young students.

A SELD representative, speaking anonymously, described these objections, stating that the curriculum ‘clashed with cultural values’ and was seen as ‘too explicit’ (Rizvi, 2019). These concerns point to a deeper tension – not merely about LSBE itself, but about the broader struggle over who controls educational content and what knowledge is deemed acceptable. Teachers, shaped by prevailing social norms, often felt uneasy discussing topics considered culturally sensitive or socially contentious, particularly in co-educational settings or when addressing mixed-gender classrooms. For instance, a teacher trainer emphasised the need for gender segregation when discussing LSBE:

We have to give awareness, but if your class is co-education, then you should separate them. If we sit boys and girls together, that is not right to me. It should be separated. You have to give that much awareness on how you have to live.

KII 1.5, Karachi, 22 November 2024

Similarly, a representative from Aahung’s partner school recounted the resistance some educators faced:

People would shy away from topics such as reproductive health and sexual abuse, including a teacher who backed out. She said, ‘Kids don’t know these things, so what are you putting in their minds?’ Even though she was a very good teacher, maybe she herself wasn’t exposed to these topics, which led to her opposition. So I think people used to panic a little upon hearing the term ‘reproductive health’... wondering how these things could be discussed in public. It was very overwhelming for them.

KII 2, Karachi, 16 October 2024

This discomfort underscores the broader challenges LSBE faces – not just from external opposition, but from within the education system itself, where gender and sexuality education remain deeply contested.

This tension is part of a larger, organised struggle over influence in education, waged by religious political parties, conservative civil society organisations, teacher unions and segments of the bureaucracy that advocate for curricular control aligned with traditionalist and religious values.

While LSBE rarely becomes a direct focal point of these debates, its implementation is shaped by the same political and ideological forces that govern curriculum decisions more broadly. For instance, the federal government's proposed SNC, though not implemented, illustrates how education often becomes a site for asserting moral and ideological authority. Religious scholars from the Muttahida Ulema Board on the SNC Committee, for example, instructed publishers to remove illustrations in biology textbooks depicting human figures 'sans clothes' to preserve Islamic morality (Hoodbhoy, 2021).⁷ Such directives demonstrate how educational reform – even in subjects like science – faces resistance framed as a defence of cultural or religious norms. These dynamics inevitably affect the sustainability and scalability of LSBE, particularly as its content touches on themes that challenge traditional values.

The framing of LSBE as child protection has undoubtedly facilitated its partial acceptance, but it also imposes limitations. Child protection is a safe, non-controversial entry point, but this narrow focus often overshadows LSBE's broader aims, such as equipping adolescents with knowledge and skills to navigate puberty and decision-making. The result is fragmented implementation, where less contentious components are prioritised while others are watered down or excluded entirely. These compromises underscore how resistance to deeper societal change remains a significant barrier.

Even private schools, which often operate with more autonomy, are not immune to these dynamics. For example, an all-boys school in a peri-urban locality of Karachi initially implemented Aahung's LSBE programme but later discontinued it. Operating under the financial support of a trust fund or endowment, the school enjoys independence in decision-making. However, the programme faced internal opposition, with school management citing discomfort among both teachers and parents. Content on puberty, in particular, was seen as problematic, as female teachers felt uneasy discussing these topics with boys. The principal, who believed such content should only be taught from a religious perspective, was the deciding voice in withdrawing from the programme.

Sindh's experience holds particular significance in Pakistan's LSBE landscape. As the only province to have formally integrated LSBE into its secondary school curriculum, Sindh provides a unique lens through which to examine both progress and resistance. While the integration represents a milestone, it also underscores the complexities of navigating opposition and ensuring sustained implementation. The lessons learned from Sindh's partial success have implications not only for other provinces but also for broader advocacy efforts aimed at integrating rights-based education into culturally sensitive environments.

While integrating LSBE into the curriculum marks a significant step forward, its implementation is shaped by the broader struggles over control, content and cultural norms within the education sector. These forces highlight how opposition to LSBE is rarely about the programme itself but instead reflects deeper anxieties around education, morality and societal change. This is why opposition to LSBE must be unpacked – not only to address surface-level objections but also to understand and challenge the underlying dynamics that may limit its impact.

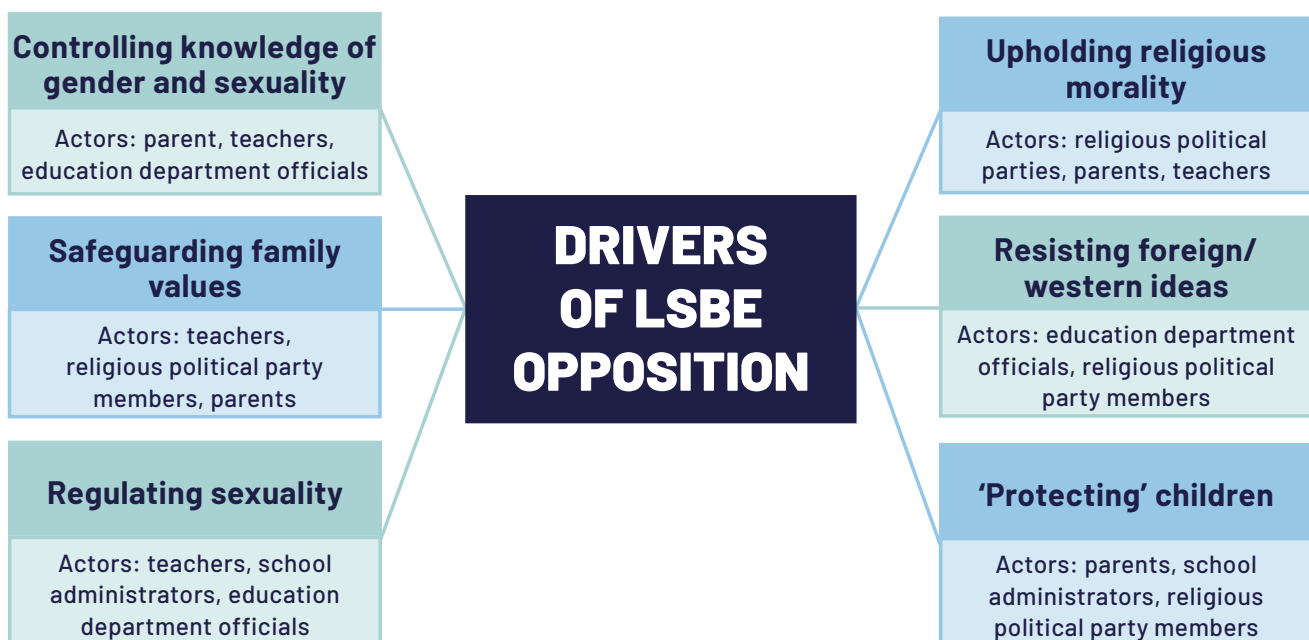
⁷ Under the Government of Punjab's Aqaf and Religious Affairs Department, The Muttahida Ulema Board Punjab is a 31-member committee, initially inaugurated in 1997, with the aim of recommending measures to reduce sectarian tensions and, among other tasks, examining cases involving objectionable anti-Islamic literature in the curriculum of educational institutes.

4 Opposition to LSBE: drivers and strategies

As noted in Chapter 3, resistance to LSBE in Pakistan comes from a range of stakeholders, including educators, religious leaders, policy-makers, parents and private schools' associations. However, this opposition is not driven by a single, coordinated anti-LSBE movement. Instead, it is embedded within existing institutions and social structures, reflecting broader anxieties about shifts in gender norms, education and young people's autonomy.

Figure 1 illustrates the key drivers of opposition to LSBE, largely rooted in social and gender norms.

Figure 1: Drivers of LSBE opposition



Source: Created by authors

These categories emerged from interviews and FGDs conducted with key stakeholders, reflecting the justifications and arguments commonly presented against LSBE. These concerns translate into specific strategies that shape how LSBE is contested, taught and received in different settings.

Key areas of contention include:

1. how LSBE is integrated into curricula
2. who has the authority to teach it
3. the language used to frame it
4. the selection of topics deemed appropriate for different age groups.

These are not just educational decisions but are deeply shaped by sociocultural and regulatory mechanisms that define what is considered acceptable in classrooms. As Durrani and Halai (2020) argue, beyond the official curriculum, schools reinforce gender hierarchies through the hidden curriculum, shaping what is considered appropriate knowledge for students. Even when gender

equality is included in national education policies, it is often treated as a technical issue of access rather than a challenge to deeply entrenched sociocultural norms. This means that while LSBE may be formally introduced, its actual implementation is shaped by the beliefs, values and biases of education stakeholders at various levels, from policy-makers to teachers and school administrators. These actors negotiate the meaning of LSBE, often enacting it in ways that align with existing gender norms rather than challenging them.

Rather than outright rejection, many opposition actors engage in strategic forms of resistance. The following sections explore these dynamics, examining how different drivers of opposition shape the specific strategies used to contest LSBE and influence its implementation.

4.1 Content censorship and selective omission to ‘protect children’s innocence’

Across interviews and FGDs, a recurring theme emerged: LSBE exposes children to certain topics too much/too early/unnecessarily, particularly subjects such as puberty, decision-making and GBV. This concern was raised by representatives of religious political parties, private school owners, teachers, school administrators, teachers’ associations, teacher training institute representatives and government curricular review bodies in two provinces. While a few of these stakeholders were broadly opposed to LSBE, the majority were conditionally supportive, advocating for modifications to curriculum content rather than outright rejection. Their primary concern was that LSBE must be introduced in a way that preserves childhood innocence and aligns with what they viewed as age-appropriate learning. However, what was considered ‘appropriate’ varied significantly, reflecting deeper anxieties about shifting gender norms and changing societal structures.

One of the key justifications for opposition is the belief that discussing gender, bodily autonomy and reproductive health with young children could confuse or corrupt them. A teacher from an Aahung partner school, who withdrew from a master trainers’ programme many years ago, expressed discomfort with these topics: ‘Kids don’t know these things, so what are you putting in their minds?’ (KII 2, Karachi, 16 October 2024). These concerns were echoed by school owners and teachers’ associations, who feared that premature discussions on GBV or bodily changes might create unnecessary fear or distress among students. A private school owner articulated this concern in the context of violence prevention:

If violence isn’t happening in a household and you’re still trying to address this issue beforehand ... that would make the child develop a negative mindset.

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

Several respondents were also apprehensive that speaking to children about topics such as puberty and reproduction could lead to earlier onset of puberty (KII 4.2, Karachi, 3 December 2024).

While these concerns were framed as protecting childhood innocence, they often reflected broader anxieties about shifting gender roles and parental authority. Many school administrators and religious political representatives worried that LSBE content – if not carefully curated – could erode traditional values, encourage defiance of parental authority or expose children to ideas they were not ready to process. One school administrator, for example, opposed discussing marital relationships with younger students, arguing that it could shift their focus away from studies. However, the underlying sentiment was that such information would enable young girls to speak up for their rights, tarnishing their innocence and leading them to disobey parental authority:

Right now, we cannot grant you permission to teach sixth-grade girls on matters concerning marriage and in-laws because these matters will cause them to abandon their studies, and then they will only focus on these matters – that I will get married by my own will, I will get engaged by my own will. What are we trying to teach sixth graders here?

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

This framing presents a contradiction: while LSBE aims to equip children with life skills and critical thinking, some opponents interpret it as a threat to parental authority and traditional family structures. As seen in other contexts, this concern about undermining familial and societal order aligns with arguments that LSBE can disrupt patriarchal social norms, rather than simply concerns over childhood innocence (Martinez et al., 2021; Ojeda and Astudillo, 2023).

Disagreements over age-appropriateness

Despite shared concerns about age-appropriateness, there was no consensus on what should be taught at what age. Stakeholders varied widely in their beliefs about what children could understand at different ages, leading to inconsistencies in LSBE implementation. Some government officials and curriculum reviewers argued that puberty should not be introduced until children had already begun experiencing it, believing that prior knowledge might lead to unnecessary curiosity. A government official responsible for teacher training stated:

These kids are not mentally developed enough for this content, because they are not at that age. If you bring life skills for them, you should bring them accordingly. I don't think puberty should be included in this.

KII 1.5, Karachi, 22 November 2024

Others, including some teachers and educationists, felt that waiting until children had already begun experiencing bodily changes left them unprepared. A teacher emphasised that students should receive information early enough to process and understand it before they face these changes firsthand:

Every kid should have awareness beforehand by their parents or teachers, otherwise they will receive information from unreliable sources such as social media.

KII 4.2, Karachi, 3 December 2024

Similarly, some actors favoured early education on GBV, particularly in response to high rates of child sexual abuse in Pakistan – around 2,227 such cases were reported between January and June 2023, equivalent to 12 children on average being sexually abused every day (Sahil, 2023).⁸ However, others – including certain school administrators and parents – argued that such discussions should only happen in secondary school, as younger children might become frightened or misunderstand the content. This lack of consensus meant that age-appropriateness was frequently used as a justification for restricting LSBE content, rather than refining it. Each stakeholder group had a different threshold

⁸ Unreported cases are likely much higher than this number, as few report due to stigma surrounding sexual abuse.

for what was ‘too much’ at a given age. A government school teacher explained how they carefully navigate discussions on GBV with younger students:

In seventh grade, we have to teach about violence, so we do, but we have to be very discreet in how we communicate it.

KII 4.7, Karachi, 20 December 2024

The teacher felt that seventh graders were too young to discuss this subject with, and so she modified language and limited discussion depth⁹. This statement underscores how teachers engage in censorship – navigating cultural sensitivities by modifying or omitting content they deem controversial. This aligns with findings from Khan and Pine (2003), where teachers, families and other stakeholders felt that information should only be communicated after the fact; for example, information on puberty should only be shared after its onset, or contraceptive information should only be shared after marriage (Khan and Pine, 2003).

These tensions are not unique to Pakistan. As Robinson et al. (2017) highlight in their study on sexuality education in Australia, similar apprehensions emerged around the preservation of childhood innocence, with stakeholders acknowledging the importance of sexuality education but insisting on regulating children’s access to certain topics deemed developmentally inappropriate. This reflects a broader reality of CSE implementation globally, that while efforts to integrate CSE into education systems may gain conditional support, they often come at the cost of compromises with gender-restrictive actors and policy-makers. In many contexts, CSE must be adapted to local sociopolitical dynamics, which can mean limiting or modifying content to ensure broader acceptance. These negotiated adaptations, while making CSE more implementable, also risk reinforcing restrictive norms, shaping curricula in ways that may dilute its transformative potential.

Censorship as a mechanism for maintaining traditional norms

Concerns about childhood innocence and age-appropriateness have led to content censorship and selective omission in LSBE implementation, particularly via formal curriculum reviews. Rather than openly opposing LSBE, stakeholders have influenced the way it is shaped and presented, leading to the removal, dilution or modification of key topics. Government curriculum review bodies in both Sindh and KP provinces have removed explicit references to puberty and reproductive health, arguing that these subjects could spark premature curiosity among students (KII 1.6, Karachi, 18 November 2024; FGD 6, KP, 4 December 2024). Even when LSBE is formally included in policy, school administrators and private school owners often choose to omit or downplay certain topics, ensuring that only a sanitised version of LSBE is taught (KII 4.4, Karachi, 12 December, 2024; KII 1.6, Jamshoro, 18 November 2024).

An official from Sindh Teachers Education Development Authority explained how this plays out in curriculum vetting processes: ‘Our team removes content that we consider too explicit and unnecessary, such as illustrations on puberty’ (KII 1.4, Karachi, 21 November 2024). Alongside the content reaching children, teacher training manuals also undergo censorship. A FGD with representatives from the Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (PITE) revealed how adjustments are made to censor controversial language:¹⁰

⁹ In Pakistan, children typically begin primary school (grade 1) at age six. Grades 6 to 8 are generally considered lower secondary, and grades 9 and 10 are upper secondary, with students usually around 11 to 16 years old across this range.

¹⁰ PITE Sindh is the leading institution for teacher education in the province. It supports SELD and the Sindh Teacher Education Development Authority in designing and implementing professional development programmes. These programmes are aligned with school education standards and curricula, aiming to develop professionally competent teachers, teacher educators and school leaders.

Earlier, it used to be difficult to design the manual, then we sent it to the provincial teacher training department. There, they converted the inappropriate words in the manual into suitable words. If you spoke directly, then those people would not be able to accept it, like there were some topics related to violence or puberty. If we used Urdu words for puberty, then those people would not be able to digest it; that is why we used words in English.

FGD 1.1, Nawabshah, 31 October 2024

Additionally, some members of religious political parties and teacher associations expressed that they are not in support of LSBE content related to decision-making, gender roles and child marriage, fearing that these discussions could embolden children to challenge parental authority (FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024; KII 1.5, Karachi, 22 November 2024; FGD 5, Karachi, 20 November 2024).

Teachers often use indirect language or euphemisms when discussing sensitive topics. A private school teacher described how this is done in co-educational settings in particular:

We explain it in very covered words in detail. Because for students from ninth and tenth grade, and because it is a co-education school, we have to maintain limitations.

KII 4.3, Karachi, 3 December 2024

Teachers from all-girls and all-boys schools shared similar opinions. This approach, while allowing some discussion of LSBE, ultimately limits students' ability to fully understand critical topics by keeping them shrouded in vague language and implied meanings (Meherali et al., 2021).

Educators and policy-makers actively modify how LSBE topics are taught, particularly by using vague or coded language and avoiding direct references to sexuality. An official from PITE openly expressed discomfort discussing SRHR topics, illustrating how deeply embedded resistance shapes how these subjects are presented:

Some things, I believe, should not be discussed. When a girl matures, there are physical changes, and discussing menstruation seems a bit strange for many... Even as I'm talking to you now, it feels a little strange. It takes time for society to develop the right mindset.

KII 1.3, Nawabshah, 11 November 2024

This hesitation reflects the broader cultural resistance to open conversations about reproductive health, reinforcing the idea that such topics are considered controversial rather than essential knowledge for young people.

This resistance is not just about children's maturity levels but also about controlling knowledge – ensuring that young people's exposure to gender and rights-based discourse remains limited. Unlike outright opposition, content censorship operates more subtly, creating the illusion of policy acceptance while limiting LSBE's impact. As a result, while LSBE remains formally recognised, the removal or softening of critical topics means that students, especially in government schools, receive an incomplete version of the curriculum, one that aligns more with conservative expectations than with the actual needs of young learners. In government schools, change needs to happen at a much larger scale than individual school management for effective implementation. In contrast, private schools are more amenable, and their agreement to implement LSBE depends on the school

management being convinced of its need and benefits. However, because of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, even private school teachers and administrations continue to make modifications to the curriculum and its delivery according to their own biases.

Educators frequently modify or self-censor LSBE content, not only due to curriculum restrictions but also out of fear of backlash from parents, school management and communities. While direct confrontations with parents are rare, the perceived threat of backlash remains influential, shaping how LSBE is navigated within schools. A participant from a private school association noted:

The parents here in Karachi, they get very happy if the girls section and boys sections [in school] are separated. The mentality is like that, that this school is good because boys and girls are taught separately. Our daughter is safe here. So, if this is the mentality of the parents, that they dislike teaching their daughters with boys, so you can imagine how topics such as these would be so shocking to them.

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

This perception leads schools to pre-emptively soften LSBE content, prioritising avoidance over open engagement to prevent controversy. Many teachers also avoid distributing written materials on sensitive topics, preferring interactive teaching methods that provide information without leaving a permanent record. A teachers' association representative explained:

If you had added this material [in written format], it would have been a big issue. It should be activity-based instead. The more activities you do, you do not have to give material to them. You can share a lot of information without the material, but through activities. If it comes in the material, it can become a big issue.

FGD 5, Karachi, 20 November 2024

This reflects an underlying fear that written materials may spark controversy or backlash, leading educators to favour verbal and non-recorded methods of instruction as a protective measure. This fear also influences how LSBE is discussed within school leadership. A principal from a long-term Aahung partner school described how this fear shapes internal policy:

Fifteen years ago, if I was in another school, I could have foreseen parents coming and arguing about teaching LSBE. Even if the subject was compulsory, they would ask for their kid to be removed.

KII 2, Karachi, 16 October 2024

To avoid such disputes, some schools deliberately keep LSBE implementation low-profile. A school administrator admitted:

We don't openly talk about LSBE in meetings because we don't want people asking questions. We just carry on with whatever is required.

FGD 5, Karachi, 20 November 2024

This highlights how LSBE is often integrated cautiously, with schools ensuring that discussions remain discreet to avoid attracting negative attention.

Teaching LSBE through a religious lens

Many opposition actors – including teachers, school management, private schools' associations, teachers' associations and religious political party representatives – advocated for teaching LSBE through a religious lens. They argued that LSBE topics such as hygiene, puberty and gender roles should be framed within Islamic teachings to ensure cultural acceptability.

Participants in interviews and FGDs suggested that LSBE content would face less resistance if linked to religious principles. For example, hygiene was often framed within the Islamic concepts of purity and impurity, while puberty education was seen as more appropriate when tied to religious obligations about maintaining purity. A SELD representative noted:

At many places we referred to the Quran for explanation which was not available in the manual. We thought that when all the information is present in Quranic verses, then why should we not give it? This is why the people here accepted this.

KII 1.1, Nawabshah, 31 October 2024

Similarly, discussions on gender roles were considered more acceptable when emphasising traditional responsibilities of men and women as outlined in Islamic teachings rather than challenging existing norms. A representative of a religious political party shared his perspective:

Our religion has never left women behind. Our religion teaches us that men are the main breadwinners of the household whereas women should be treated like princesses so they shouldn't have to work.

FGD 4.2, Karachi, 9 December 2024

Some educators also described religious framing as a practical strategy to avoid backlash from parents and communities. A government school teacher explained:

If you approach students with such topics through Hadith and Quran verses, there is no problem. In fact, parents and the community will appreciate it.

FGD 3.2, Karachi, 29 October 2024

This suggests that linking LSBE to religious doctrine can serve as a protective measure, allowing discussions on bodily changes and decision-making to take place within a culturally sanctioned framework.

However, embedding LSBE within an Islamic framework also reinforces conservative gender norms, shaping how students understand bodily autonomy, relationships and social roles. This demonstrates that opposition to LSBE is not always about rejecting it entirely, but rather about influencing its framing to align with religious and cultural expectations.

4.2 Content dilution to uphold conservative social norms

Another way in which opposition manifests is through content dilution – a strategy that subtly reshapes LSBE to focus on less contentious topics while minimising or removing discussions on gender, sexuality and bodily autonomy. Unlike content censorship, which involves the outright

removal of specific terms or topics, content dilution subtly shifts LSBE's focus by expanding its scope to emphasise themes that are widely accepted and non-controversial in conservative settings. This redirection enables LSBE to be framed as a general self-improvement programme, rather than an initiative that equips children with critical knowledge and skills about gender, sexuality and reproductive health. The reframing of LSBE as a neutral life skills programme reflects a broader pattern seen in gender equality policies, where commitments to inclusion are often superficial and depoliticised. As Durrani and Halai (2020) argue, gender is first silenced by technical concerns about pedagogy and then flattened within discourses of diversity and multiculturalism. Rather than addressing power structures and entrenched gender norms, policies tend to focus on access to education while avoiding discussions about bodily autonomy, reproductive rights and gender-based power imbalances. This framing allows LSBE to be accepted within policy frameworks while ensuring that its most transformative aspects are diluted or excluded during implementation.

Examples of broadening and diluting content include SRH being framed as personal hygiene and GBV being framed as 'family harmony'. A teacher training department official described this shift in focus:

Life skills education is broad. It is not just about puberty or gender equality; it includes career counselling and guidance about life choices.

KII 1.4, Karachi, 21 November 2024

Through this reframing, LSBE is increasingly positioned as an umbrella framework that covers general well-being topics, while discussions on SRHR-related issues are minimised or omitted. This has resulted in the broadening of LSBE's curriculum to emphasise topics such as mental health, career planning and communication skills while de-prioritising SRHR. Such modifications ensure that LSBE materials are framed in ways that align with traditional gender and social hierarchies, reducing the likelihood of backlash while limiting young people's access to critical information about their bodies and rights.

LSBE's expanding scope and its impact on SRHR

The broadening of LSBE's scope has significant consequences for SRHR education, as it moves LSBE away from addressing adolescents' specific health and rights needs. While topics such as mental health, career planning and interpersonal skills are important, their increasing prominence in LSBE as a result of pressure from gender-restrictive actors means that the curriculum is shifting away from addressing SRH, puberty, consent and bodily autonomy. This shift is evident even within institutions that originally adopted LSBE with a strong SRHR focus. A senior administrator working in an Aahung partner school described how their institution, after several years of LSBE implementation, had independently revised its curriculum to make SRHR a minor component:

Feelings, [basic human] rights, balanced diet – these are the things they [teachers and parents] like. But the sensitive SRHR topics, they have to be convinced on these.

KII 2, Karachi, 16 October 2024

The partner school no longer has an SRHR-focused LSBE curriculum and is still in process of organising its version of LSBE. Similarly, an Aahung trainer recounted their experience with policy-makers:

Like, if I say, 'let's talk about puberty and its ages, its changes, what happens with what age.' They tell you that you don't need to tell the students this, they will find out for themselves... To them [the education department] these are far-fetched issues. So, they don't like to talk about these things. They want to carry on with teaching soft skills.

KII 6, Karachi, 24 November 2024

By expanding LSBE into safe, depoliticised territory, gender-restrictive actors in educational spaces shift conversations away from gender, sexuality and bodily autonomy.

This subtle form of opposition presents a new set of challenges for LSBE advocates. Unlike direct censorship, content dilution operates under the guise of progress, making it harder to push back against. This shift presents two major difficulties for LSBE advocacy. First, LSBE is becoming increasingly disconnected from CSE. While CSE has always required adaptation to local contexts, LSBE in Pakistan is being reframed in ways that exclude its original focus on SRH. Secondly, opposition actors can now claim they support LSBE while resisting its controversial components. By emphasising 'safe' topics, they argue that they are committed to life skills education, even as they ensure that LSBE does not challenge existing power structures.

Content dilution represents a growing and more diffuse challenge for LSBE implementation in Pakistan. Unlike outright censorship, this strategy expands LSBE's scope in ways that reduce its ability to address SRHR, ensuring that conversations about gender, sexuality and bodily autonomy remain limited. This approach allows opposition actors to maintain control over LSBE's trajectory, shaping it in ways that align with conservative values.

4.3 Moral scrutiny of LSBE educators and advocates

Opposition to LSBE is not only about what is taught but also who is seen as legitimate enough to teach it. Durrani and Halai (2020) highlight that education reforms are formulated through competing political and ideological interests, where global policy discourses are filtered through local power dynamics. This means that even when LSBE is introduced at the policy level, its meaning is actively negotiated by various actors, each shaping its implementation according to their own beliefs about gender, morality and cultural values. These tensions are reflected in who is allowed to discuss LSBE content, with unmarried women trainers or younger educators often facing heightened scrutiny and rejection. Gender-restrictive actors also question the moral authority of the individuals delivering LSBE, particularly when discussing SRHR topics. In Pakistan, sex outside marriage is illegal and widely regarded as immoral under religious jurisprudence, and discussions about SRHR often exclude unmarried youth entirely. This exclusion is evident in the youth policies of Pakistan's four major provinces, where there is no mention of SRHR services for unmarried adolescents (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency, 2020).

A government school principal expressed scepticism about whether young trainers should be allowed to deliver LSBE content:

Being unmarried, even though I was an adult and a mature person, I didn't know those things. So, I was thinking, how will we tell those things to children? And our teaching staff was mostly unmarried at that time.

FGD 5, Karachi, 20 November 2024

The perception that unmarried individuals lack the authority to discuss sensitive topics adds another layer of resistance. Throughout the research, stakeholders, including teachers and private school association members, repeatedly emphasised their discomfort discussing SRHR with the research staff, particularly when the staff consisted of young, unmarried women. This unease underscores the societal belief that discussions about SRHR must align with strict moral codes, often tied to marital status and perceived personal integrity.

In conclusion, these patterns of resistance – whether through censorship, content dilution or the moral scrutiny of educators – highlight the structural barriers that limit LSBE’s transformative potential. As Durrani and Halai (2020) argue, gender equality reforms in education are often met with ideological resistance, and those challenging gender hierarchies face aggressive backlash. While resistance persists, so do opportunities for engagement and change. The next chapter explores how LSBE proponents actively counter backlash and navigate restrictive environments to keep pushing for increased integration and implementation of LSBE within education systems.

5 Countering backlash: successful approaches and emerging concerns

As outlined in Chapter 4, opposition actors employ multiple strategies to contest LSBE, including content censorship, dilution and self-censorship by educators. Rather than rejecting LSBE outright, these actors redefine and weaken it, shaping how it is presented and understood.

In response, Aahung and other LSBE advocates have developed counter-strategies that ensure continued implementation despite resistance. These efforts have led to curricular integration in Sindh’s secondary schools, an agreement to expand LSBE into primary education and progress towards integration in Balochistan. Additionally, LSBE has been successfully implemented in private schools and community-based education settings.

These strategies focus on four key areas:

1. framing LSBE within acceptable discourse to prevent backlash
2. negotiating selective compromises while maintaining core components
3. strengthening teacher capacity to counter classroom-level censorship
4. leveraging alliances and political openings to sustain advocacy efforts.

5.1 Framing LSBE to navigate censorship

One of the most common opposition tactics is content censorship, where LSBE materials are edited to remove references to puberty, gender and bodily autonomy. To counter this, LSBE actors strategically frame LSBE within child protection, safety and public health discourses – themes that are broadly accepted and difficult to contest (De Bruycker, 2017).

Aahung and the Sindh government have used this approach to secure LSBE's integration into curricula, for instance, by emphasising the topic of 'safe and unsafe touch' within LSBE (Rizvi, 2019). Similarly, NGOs working on SRH awareness have adapted materials to pass government approvals while ensuring core content is retained in training settings. As one NGO representative explained:

Sometimes in government-approved training manuals, we remove terms like 'puberty' or 'bodily autonomy' if those words are flagged. But once teachers are in training, we discuss those concepts fully. The goal is to get LSBE approved, then make sure teachers actually understand what needs to be taught.

FGD 7, Karachi, 5 December 2024

While this approach ensures LSBE remains in formal education spaces, it also presents long-term risks. If LSBE continues to be framed solely as a child protection measure, broader discussions on gender, autonomy and rights may remain sidelined. In Sindh, where LSBE has gained greater acceptance, advocates are now working to expand this framing to include decision-making, gender equality and SRHR.

5.2 Preventing content dilution while maintaining core components

Beyond censorship, opposition actors dilute LSBE by broadening its scope to focus on generic life skills while minimising or removing SRHR topics. To prevent this, LSBE advocates have worked to embed SRHR within curricula and training spaces, ensuring that key content is not erased even when public-facing materials are softened. One of the most effective strategies has been securing LSBE's place in education policies before dilution efforts gain momentum. As an LSBE advocate explained:

We didn't just wait for LSBE to be added to the Sindh curriculum; we worked closely with policy-makers to ensure that it wasn't diluted beyond recognition. The key was being involved in shaping how LSBE was defined, rather than just responding after changes were made.

KII 3, Karachi, 18 December 2024

Despite these efforts, implementation challenges persist. Some school administrators and teachers narrow LSBE's scope in classroom delivery, emphasising neutral life skills topics while avoiding gender and rights-based discussions. Teacher training has been a critical countermeasure, equipping educators to ensure LSBE is delivered in its entirety, regardless of external pressures.

A teacher training expert highlighted the importance of teacher agency:

In practice, it often comes down to the teacher. Even if the content is approved in the curriculum, some teachers skip it, while others teach it more fully. That's why we focus so much on the training process.

KII 1.1, Karachi, 31 October 2024

However, dilution remains a growing challenge. Many actors now support LSBE not because they align with its SRHR objectives, but because they view it as a general life skills programme. Ensuring LSBE remains comprehensive and does not lose its intended purpose will be a critical challenge moving forward.

5.3 Building champions among teachers and educators

Teacher support is crucial for sustained LSBE implementation. Recognising this, LSBE advocates have focused on capacity-building efforts to create champions within the education sector. Training programmes ensure that teachers not only deliver LSBE effectively but also advocate for its importance within their schools and communities.

A senior education officer emphasised this strategy:

We are very careful about who we position as trainers and facilitators. It makes a big difference when LSBE is taught by people who are already respected in the education sector. That's why we focus so much on teacher capacity-building – so that the educators themselves become advocates.

KII 1.5, Karachi, 22 November 2024

By positioning teachers as LSBE champions, advocates reduce opposition that stems from distrust of external organisations. Teachers who understand and support LSBE are more likely to navigate resistance from school administrators and parents, ensuring LSBE remains part of classroom practice.

5.4 Sensitising parents and engaging communities

Direct engagement with parents and community stakeholders has been one of the most effective ways to increase LSBE acceptance and reduce opposition (Svanemyr et al., 2015; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018). A management representative from a partner school shared how 14 mothers who participated in an LSBE programme not only remained engaged but also spread awareness within their community (KII 2, Karachi, 16 October 2024). Similarly, in Zambia, NGOs trained mothers to educate other girls, extending LSBE's reach beyond the classroom (Mwape and Munsaka, 2022). In conservative settings, where formal school-based advocacy may face resistance, involving parents helps neutralise opposition and positions LSBE as a shared community initiative, ensuring children receive accurate, rights-based education.

5.5 Broader strategies for sustaining LSBE amid resistance

Beyond responding to specific opposition tactics, LSBE actors have leveraged broader strategies to sustain advocacy and maintain momentum despite resistance. Rather than directly countering opposition, these approaches create an enabling environment for wider acceptance and implementation, reducing the likelihood of backlash. For instance, high-profile incidents like the Zainab Ansari case in 2018 (see Section 3.4) shifted public discourse, allowing LSBE actors to push for policy integration by framing LSBE within urgent conversations on child protection. However, such political openings are unpredictable and cannot serve as the primary driver of LSBE expansion. Strengthening alliances across civil society, educators, policy-makers, and media has also been crucial in amplifying advocacy and safeguarding LSBE's core content. Yet, alliances remain fragmented, requiring stronger coordination across advocacy groups. As Cense et al. (2018) highlight, SRHR is not only a health issue but also one of social power relations; without more cohesive advocacy, opposition actors can isolate LSBE proponents and push for diluted or heavily censored versions of LSBE.

6 Way forward

Opposition to LSBE is deeply intertwined with entrenched gender norms that shape what kinds of knowledge are considered acceptable and who is permitted to impart it. Resistance to LSBE is not simply about content; it is about the broader challenge that SRHR education poses to existing gender and power structures. Throughout this study, educators and private school representatives expressed discomfort with LSBE's emphasis on bodily autonomy and gender equality, often positioning these discussions as inappropriate or unnecessary. These concerns reflect dominant social norms that regulate discussions on sexuality and reproduction, reinforcing the idea that such topics must be restricted within specific moral and relational boundaries. Gender-restrictive actors capitalise on these anxieties, portraying LSBE as a threat to cultural values and using these narratives to justify continued resistance at both policy and implementation levels.

Beyond ideological opposition, LSBE's institutionalisation is also constrained by increasing restrictions on civic space, which have allowed gender-restrictive actors to operate with impunity. Bureaucratic inertia further reinforces these challenges, slowing implementation and making LSBE vulnerable to both ideological pushback and administrative roadblocks. While outright rejection of LSBE remains common in certain contexts, a more prevalent trend is the conditional acceptance of LSBE, where stakeholders endorse it only after stripping away its core SRHR components. This form of opposition, which allows LSBE to exist within education systems while diluting its transformative potential, presents a significant challenge as it creates the appearance of progress while weakening LSBE's core purpose.

Given these conditions, LSBE actors must move beyond a singular focus on securing policy inclusion and shift toward ensuring that LSBE is delivered meaningfully and with integrity. This requires clear content protections to prevent dilution, stronger advocacy to counter efforts to redefine LSBE and sustainable funding that allows for long-term engagement rather than short-term interventions. Without these measures, LSBE risks becoming a fragmented and depoliticised framework, limiting its ability to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed, autonomous decisions.

6.1 Establishing minimum service delivery standards

Establishing minimum service delivery standards is essential to counter content censorship, dilution and camouflaging. As highlighted in Chapter 4, opposition actors continue to try to water down LSBE, presenting it as a general well-being or personal development programme while sidestepping its original focus on SRHR. Without clear standards that define LSBE's essential components, opposition actors will continue reshaping it to fit their own agendas. These standards should ensure that SRHR-related topics such as puberty, bodily autonomy, decision-making and gender equality remain central to LSBE's framework, regardless of external pressures.

Establishing these minimum standards would also provide a benchmark for evaluating LSBE implementation across different provinces. Currently, LSBE's scope and depth vary significantly depending on regional priorities and the level of opposition encountered. A well-defined set of minimum content standards would help ensure that LSBE remains a consistent and effective framework rather than becoming an ambiguous or watered-down programme.

6.2 Moving beyond the child protection lens

While the child protection lens has played a crucial role in legitimising LSBE and securing its place in policy spaces, particularly in Sindh, it is now posing limitations. The emphasis on child safety has provided a socially acceptable framing for LSBE, allowing for discussions on sensitive topics such as abuse prevention and consent - which still remain essential. However, this framing also introduces limitations, as it does not create space for broader discussions on SRHR, particularly around bodily autonomy, reproductive health and gender-based power structures.

Moving forward, LSBE advocates must strategically expand beyond the child protection framework, ensuring that LSBE is not permanently constrained within a narrow, harm-reduction approach but is recognised as a comprehensive education model that supports adolescent decision-making and well-being. However, child protection will still need to be used as an entry point in many regions, until in-roads are made and some acceptance is achieved. Since LSBE acceptance and integration is so uneven across the country, advocates need to be adaptive and use this lens as needed, and push beyond it when it is no longer as useful.

6.3 Addressing the broadening of LSBE's meaning

One of the most pressing challenges emerging is the broadening of LSBE's meaning in ways that dilute its SRHR core. While LSBE has gained wider acceptance among policy-makers, educators and civil society actors, this legitimacy has often come at a cost - many stakeholders now endorse LSBE but have redefined it on their own terms, stripping it of its more controversial content.

This reframing presents a more insidious form of resistance than outright censorship. While previous challenges focused on getting LSBE recognised as legitimate, the current challenge is that LSBE is being accepted - but only under conditions that fundamentally change its scope. Unlike direct content removal, this type of dilution reshapes LSBE into something that is socially and politically palatable but does not fully meet young people's SRHR needs.

To push back against this trend, Aahung and other LSBE advocates have identified key strategies to maintain LSBE's integrity:

- Establishing minimum content standards (as outlined in Section 6.1) to ensure SRHR topics remain central.
- Strengthening teacher training and monitoring, ensuring that LSBE is not informally reshaped at the school level to avoid backlash. Even if policy commitments remain intact, dilution often occurs at the point of implementation.
- Framing LSBE as an essential education component, not just a well-being initiative. This requires targeted engagement with policy-makers and educators, ensuring that LSBE is recognised as a comprehensive framework that includes SRHR, not just generic life skills.

6.4 Strengthening educator training to prevent self-censorship

While policy-level opposition remains a concern, self-censorship by educators presents an equally significant challenge. Many teachers express hesitation in fully engaging with LSBE content due to concerns about backlash from school leadership, parents or broader community stakeholders. This often results in the selective omission of key topics, particularly those related to bodily autonomy, reproductive health and gender norms.

Addressing this challenge requires LSBE training to go beyond content delivery and equip educators with the skills necessary to navigate resistance and engage with opposition effectively. Training must include guidance on responding to concerns from parents, administrators and community members in ways that reinforce LSBE's legitimacy. Educators also need structured support in navigating controversial topics while maintaining content integrity, ensuring that LSBE remains comprehensive in its delivery. Additionally, the creation of peer support networks will provide educators with spaces to discuss challenges and share strategies for implementation. When educators feel prepared and supported, they are less likely to dilute or omit critical aspects of LSBE, strengthening its impact at the classroom level.

6.5 Securing trust-based funding

Finally, LSBE's sustainability depends on securing long-term, trust-based funding that allows for adaptive strategies rather than short-term, project-based approaches. Many LSBE initiatives are currently constrained by funding structures that prioritise politically neutral deliverables and short-term outputs over sustained engagement and systemic change. As a result, organisations often face pressure to align LSBE content with donor priorities, sometimes at the expense of SRHR integrity.

Shifting toward more flexible funding models would enable LSBE actors to engage in long-term policy advocacy rather than being restricted by rigid project cycles. Greater funding flexibility would also allow LSBE actors to push back against dilution efforts rather than having to adjust content for the sake of maintaining donor approvals. Additionally, securing funding that prioritises long-term impact over immediate deliverables would enable LSBE actors to proactively counter evolving forms of opposition, rather than being forced into a reactive stance. Strengthening these funding mechanisms is critical to ensuring LSBE's longevity and its ability to remain responsive to shifting political and social dynamics.

6.6 Conclusion

The journey toward embedding LSBE within Pakistan's education system has achieved important milestones, yet significant challenges persist. As opposition shifts from outright resistance to more subtle strategies of dilution and co-optation, LSBE actors must continuously refine their approaches to safeguard its core principles. Ultimately, LSBE's success should not be measured by a single milestone – whether integration into curricula or policy commitments – but by its impact on educational practices and its ability to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to make informed, autonomous decisions. By remaining vigilant to emerging threats and adapting strategies with clarity and intent, LSBE advocates can ensure that the programme not only endures but continues to serve as a transformative force within Pakistan's education landscape.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Life skills-based education content for schools

Aahung developed this undiluted LSBE curriculum, which served as the foundation for an integration framework used to incorporate LSBE into Sindh's secondary school curriculum. Instead of introducing LSBE as a standalone subject or in a sequential order, the education department distributed its components across different grades and subjects – for example, a topic might be included in Science for grade 6 and another in Social Studies for grade 7.

Table A.1: Life skills-based education content for schools

Topic	Outcome	Grades taught
Self-awareness and building self-respect	To build individual confidence by raising awareness on self-respect and self-awareness	Grades 6–7
Communication skills	Acknowledging effective communication and understanding verbal and non-verbal modes of communication	Part 1: Grades 6–7 Part 2: Grades 8–10
Feelings	Understanding feelings and emotions and how to express them in appropriate ways	Grades 6–7
Values	Understanding the concept of values and recognising actions and their consequences	Grades 6–7
Human rights	Raising awareness on human rights for better understanding of roles and responsibilities	Part 1: Grades 6–7 Part 2: Grades 8–10
Gender and sex	Understanding the difference between gender and sex	Part 1: Grades 6–7 Part 2: Grades 8–10
Self-protection	Building such skills in adolescents that they are able to protect themselves	Grades 6–7
Health for all	Understanding the holistic idea of health and increasing information on different aspects of it	Grades 6–7
Peer pressure	Understanding the difference between friends and people within the same age group. Knowing the importance of saying no to peer pressure	Grades 6–7
Balanced diet	Building an understanding of a balanced diet for leading a healthy life	Grades 6–7
Bodily growth and changes	Raising awareness on physical, emotional and social changes associated with puberty and reproductive health so that adolescents can have self-confidence	Grades 6–7
Reaching out to a healthcare practitioner	Identifying appropriate healthcare facilities and building skills that help in effective health communication	Grades 6–7
Decision-making	Decision-making and its short-term and long-term impacts	Grades 6–7

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Dangerous substances	Identifying dangerous substances and their negative impact on health	Grades 8-10
Young people and families	Raising awareness on marriage laws and marital rights of wife and husband. Understanding the marriage contract	Grades 8-10
Maternal and infant health	Identifying any threats during pregnancy and taking necessary steps. Understanding the sociocultural responsibilities of a family	Grades 8-10
Hepatitis	Understanding various types of hepatitis and building knowledge on preventative measures	Grades 8-10
HIV/AIDS	Understanding various types of HIV/AIDS and building knowledge on preventative measures	Grades 8-10
Violence	Knowing different types of violence and building capacity in young individuals to identify and protect themselves from any threats	Grades 8-10

About ALiGN

ALiGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, 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.

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Cover photo

Schoolgirls at an Aahung partner school reading in the shade of a tree. © Aahung

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